102
CHEAT
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2025

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Cheat Sheets

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From Young to Old (1/4)

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FROM YOUNG TO OLD

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From Young to Old (2/4)

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Skull structure

Young

Young people typically have smooth skin, so the focus is more on features like the eyes, nose, and mouth. It’s easier because there’s less detail, but it’s also more challenging because there’s little room for mistakes. If you’re used to drawing older faces, embrace the simplicity of younger ones.

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From Young to Old (3/4)

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Middle - Aged

Senior

As people age, their skin becomes saggy. Remember that the skull underneath does not change; it's the soft tissue that sags, causing loose skin and folds to occur over time. The nose and ears also tend to grow as you get older, so keep that in mind.

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From Young to Old (4/4)

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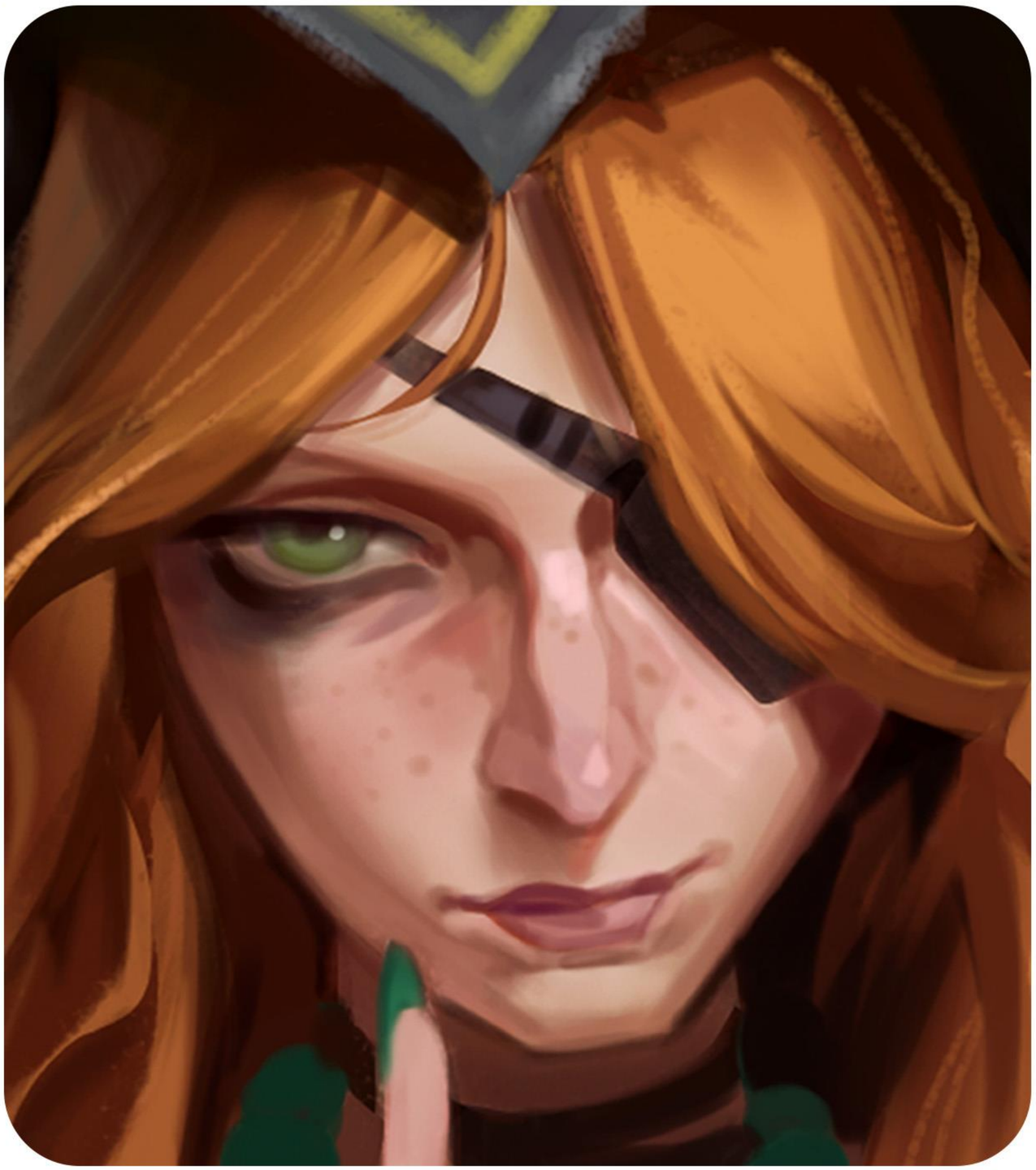

For young faces, use soft gradients and embrace simplicity. Add imperfections to give the face a bit more personality.

Remember: smooth skin, large eyes, smaller noses, and fuller lips.

Older faces will have wrinkles, bumps, and more details. Don’t be afraid to add these details and allow elements to sag.

Remember: rough skin, baggy eyes, larger noses, nasolabial folds, and thinner lips.

See the video process on YouTube

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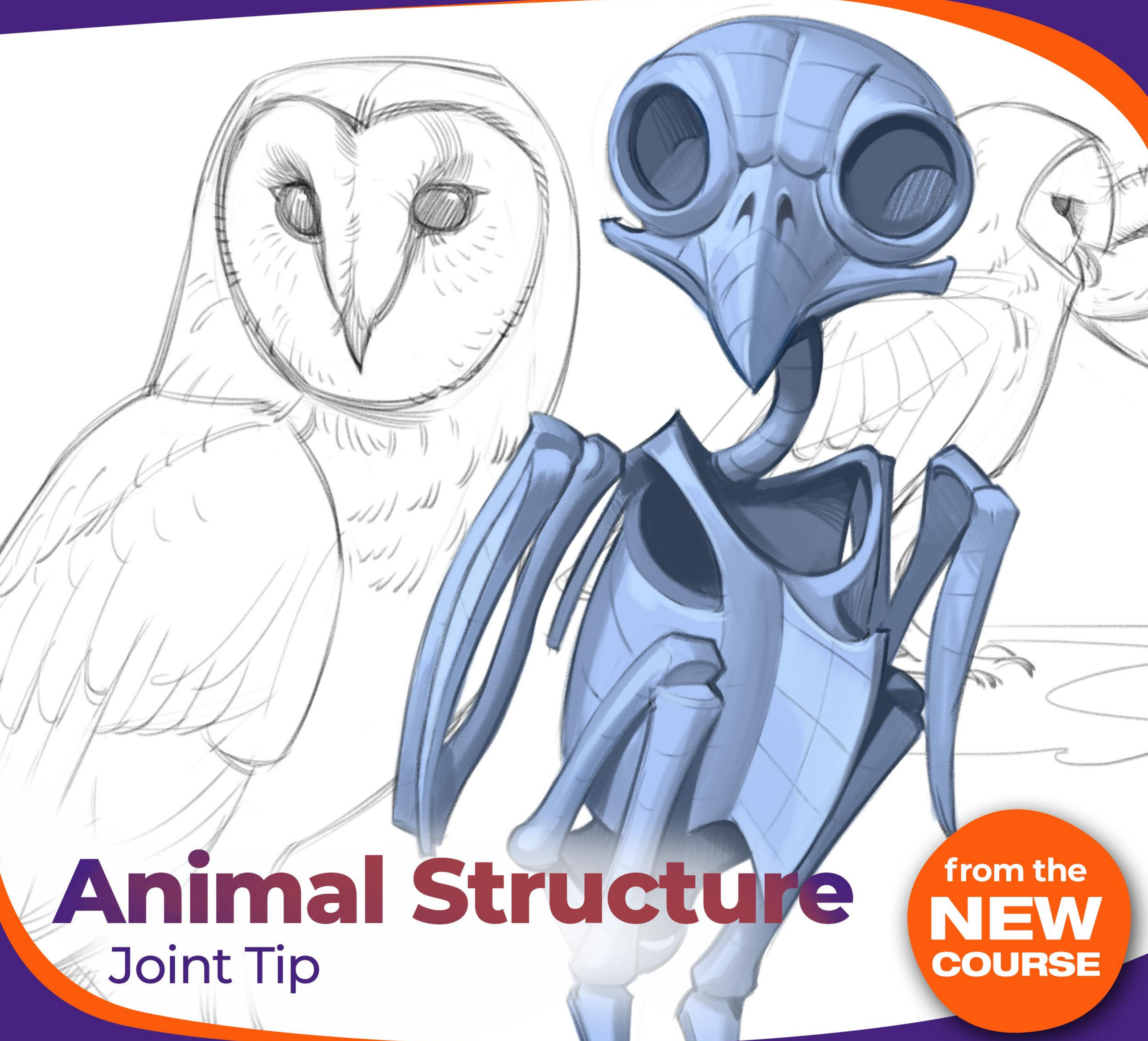

Animal Structure

Joint Tip

from the NEW COURSE

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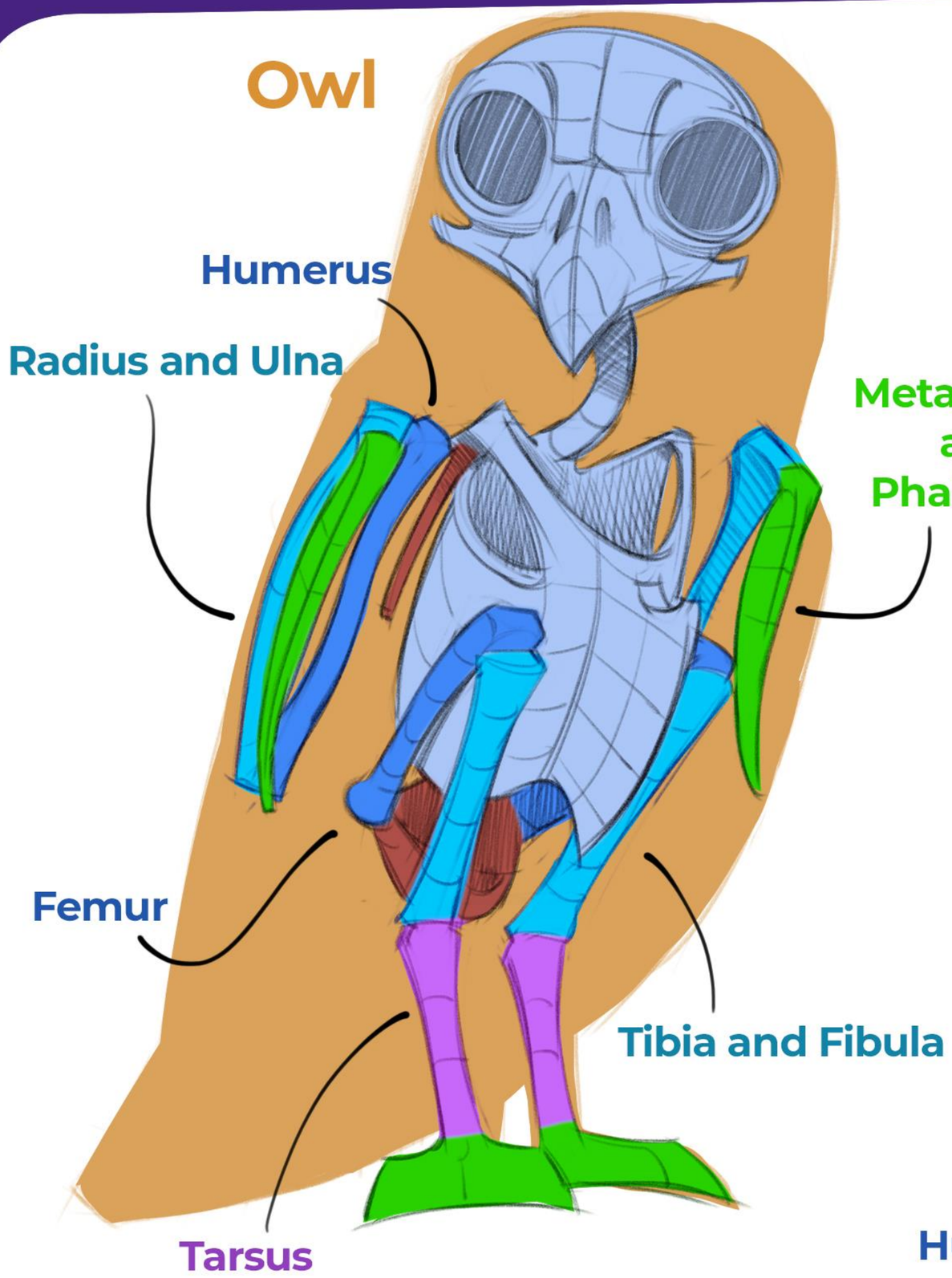
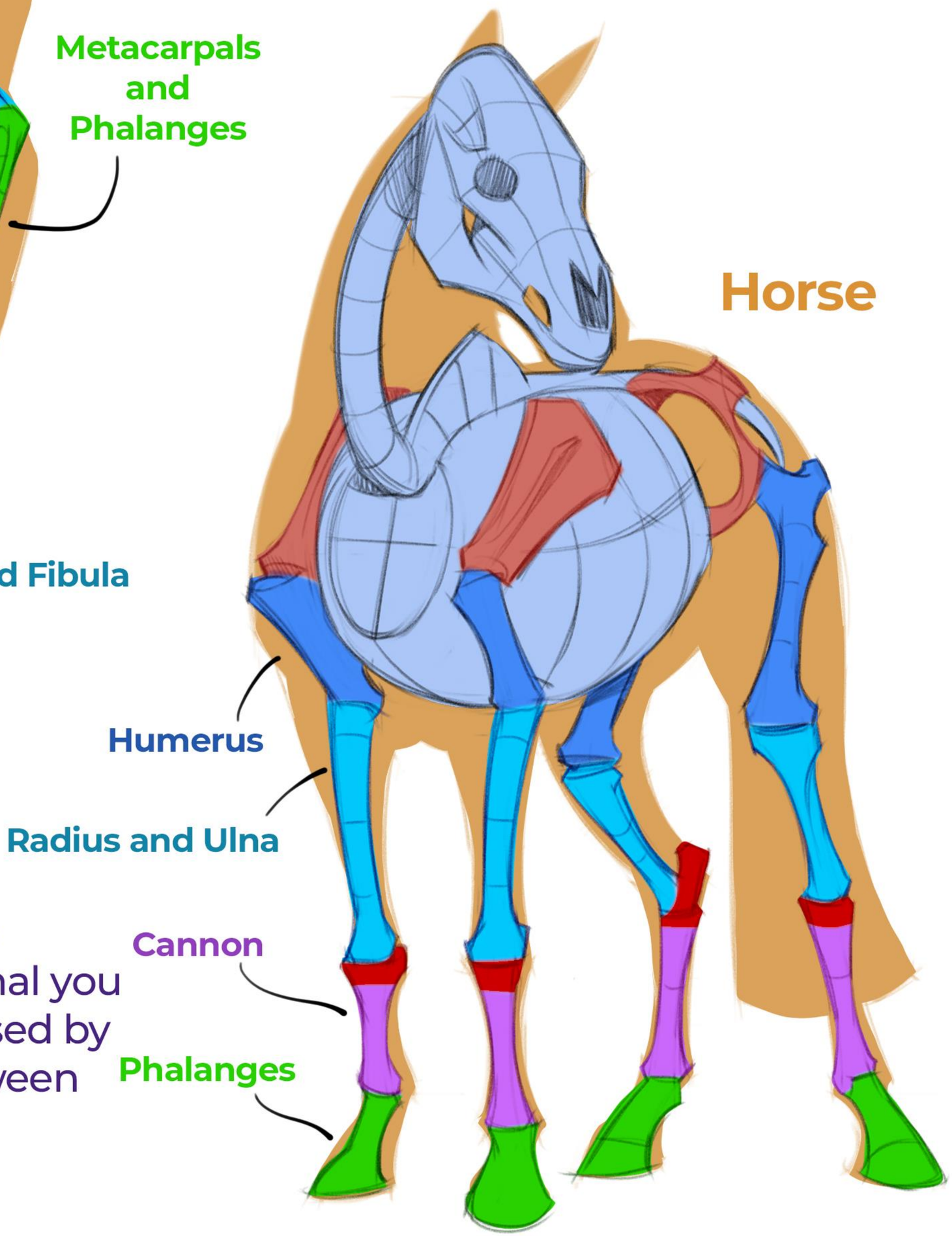
Naming conventions often overlap between animals, with only a few differences. The closer two animals are related, the more similar they tend to be.





It's important to understand the underlying structure of the animal you are studying. You may be surprised by how many similarities exist between different animal classes.

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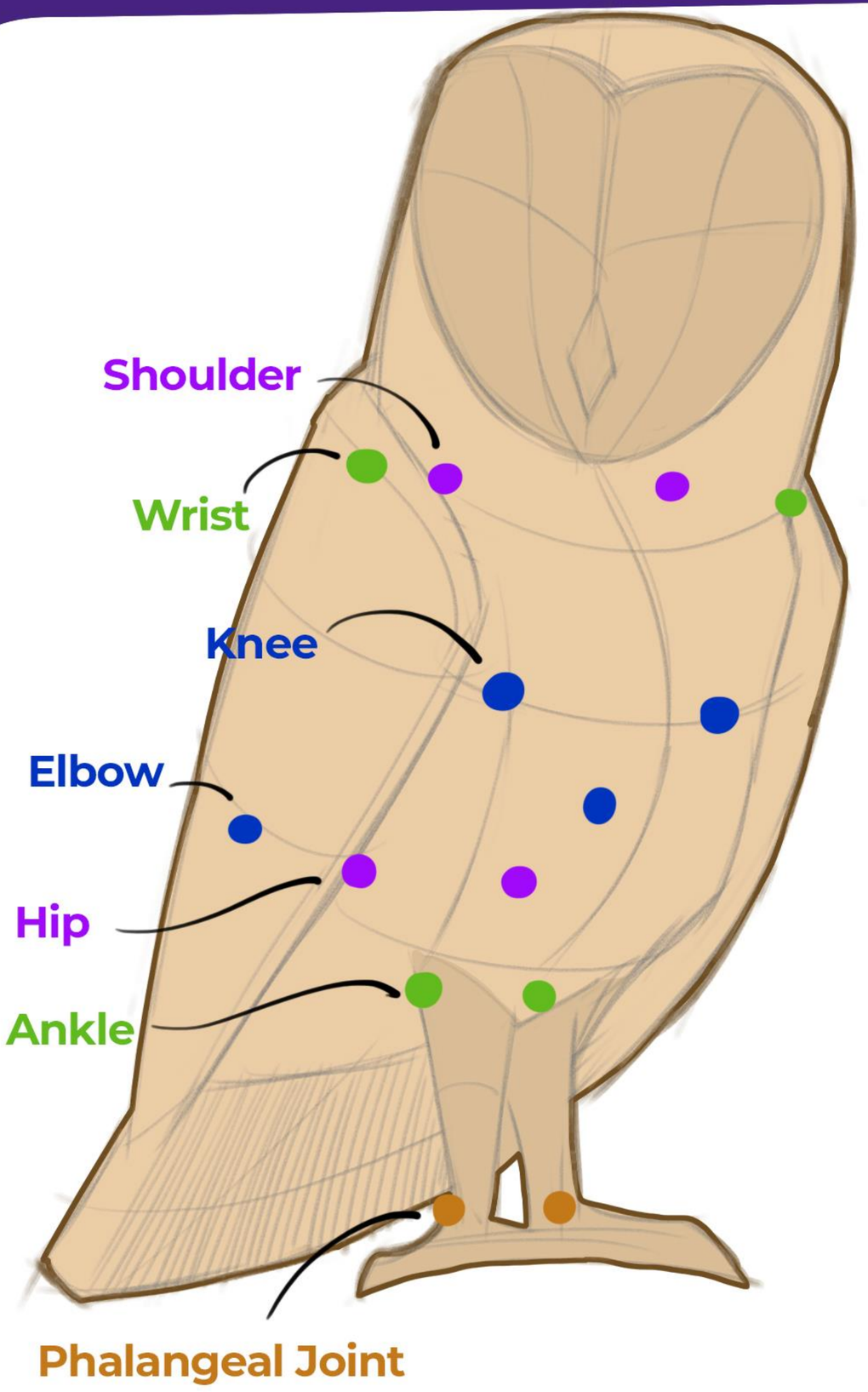
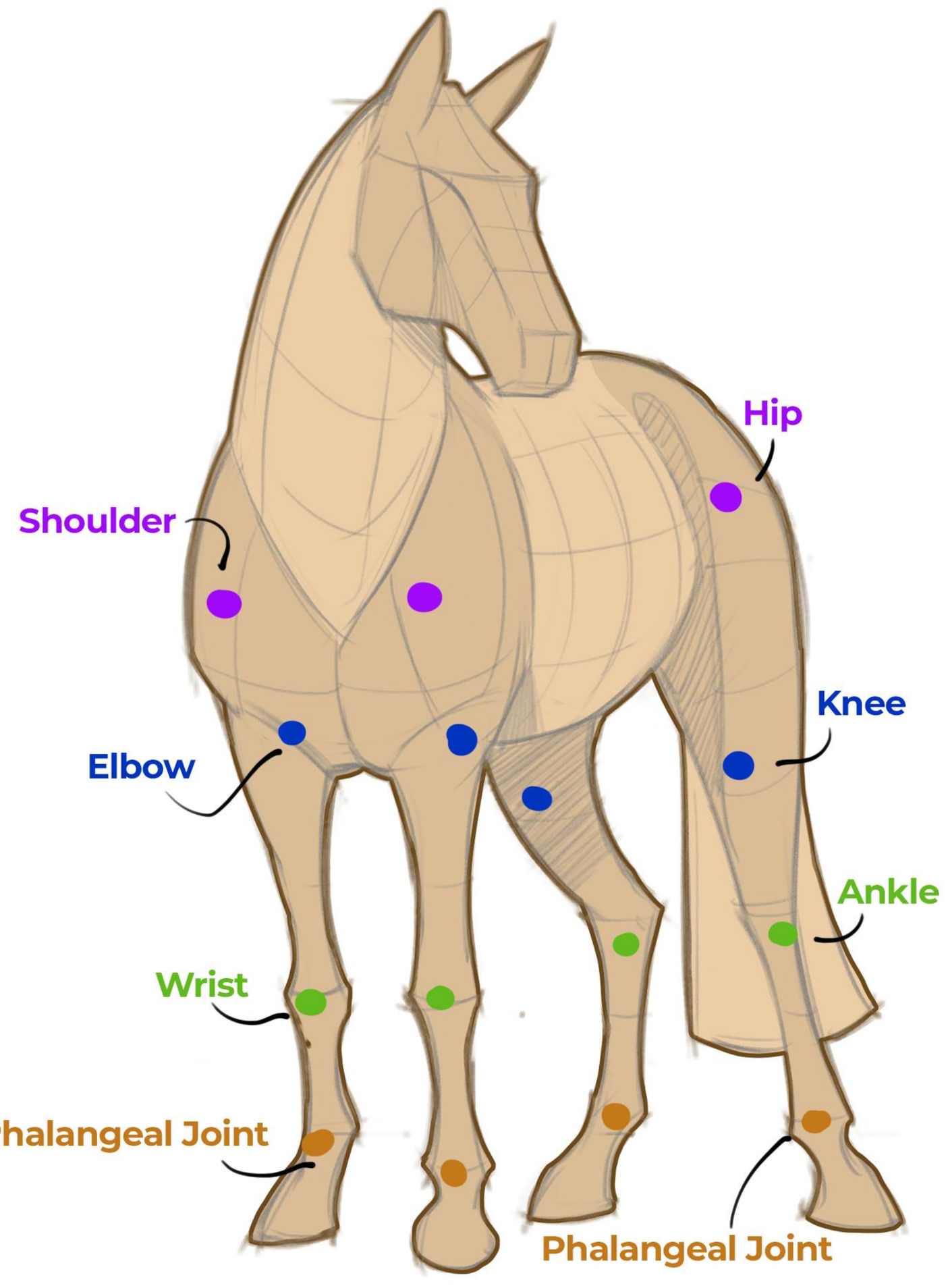


Horses are easier to study, since they have less hair and fat covering their limbs, but people often confuse the *elbow*, *shoulder*, and *wrist*. Remember that certain joints can only bend in specific directions.



Owls have many feathers covering their limbs, but in certain positions the limbs become visible, and it's important to understand where they are beneath all that plumage.

Blueprint for Bird Wings

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Blueprint for Bird Wings (2/3)

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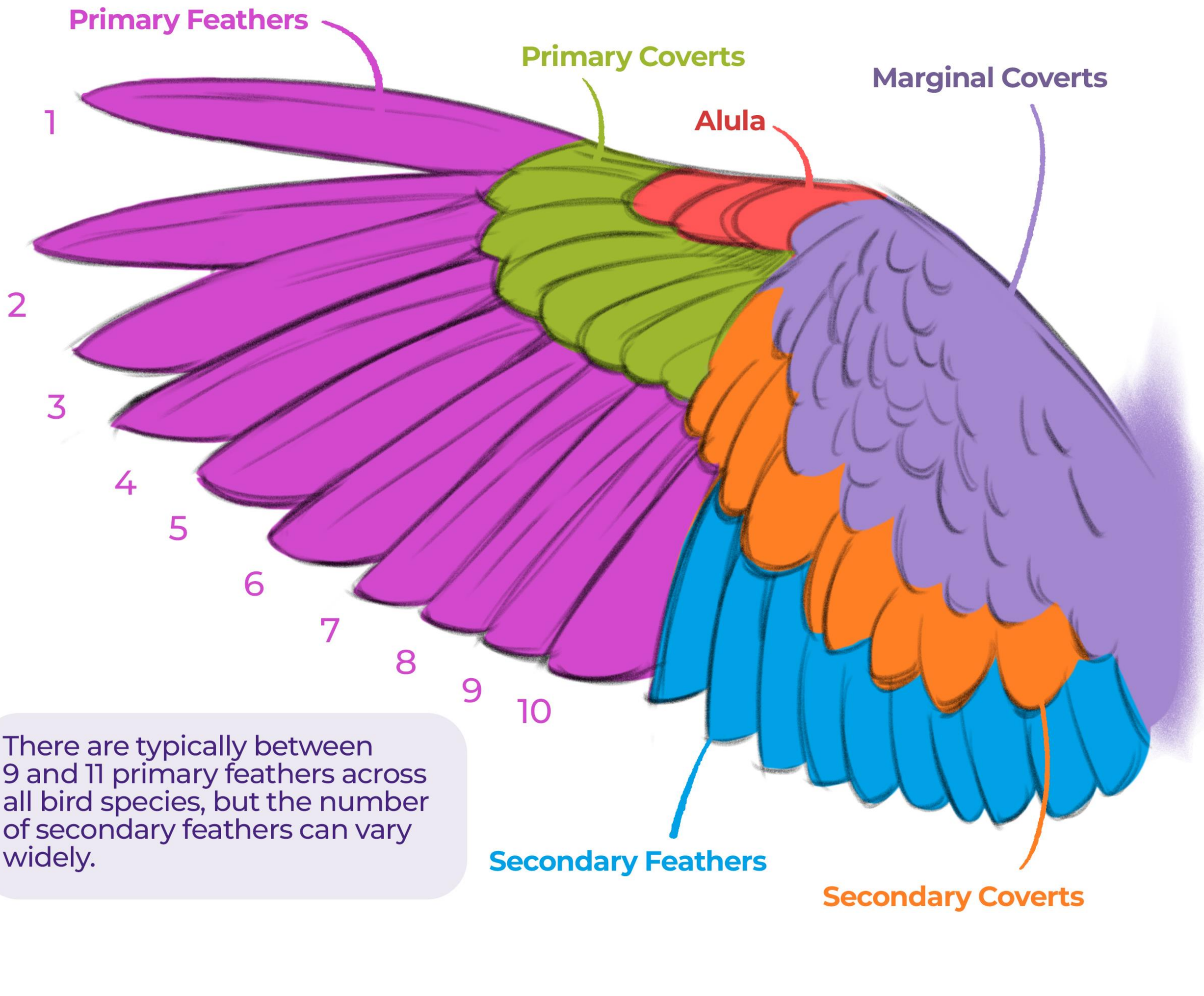
Bird wings share a similar structure, but differ in the size and number of feathers. Here's an example using a pigeon wing seen from above.



There are typically between 9 and 11 primary feathers across all bird species, but the number of secondary feathers can vary widely.

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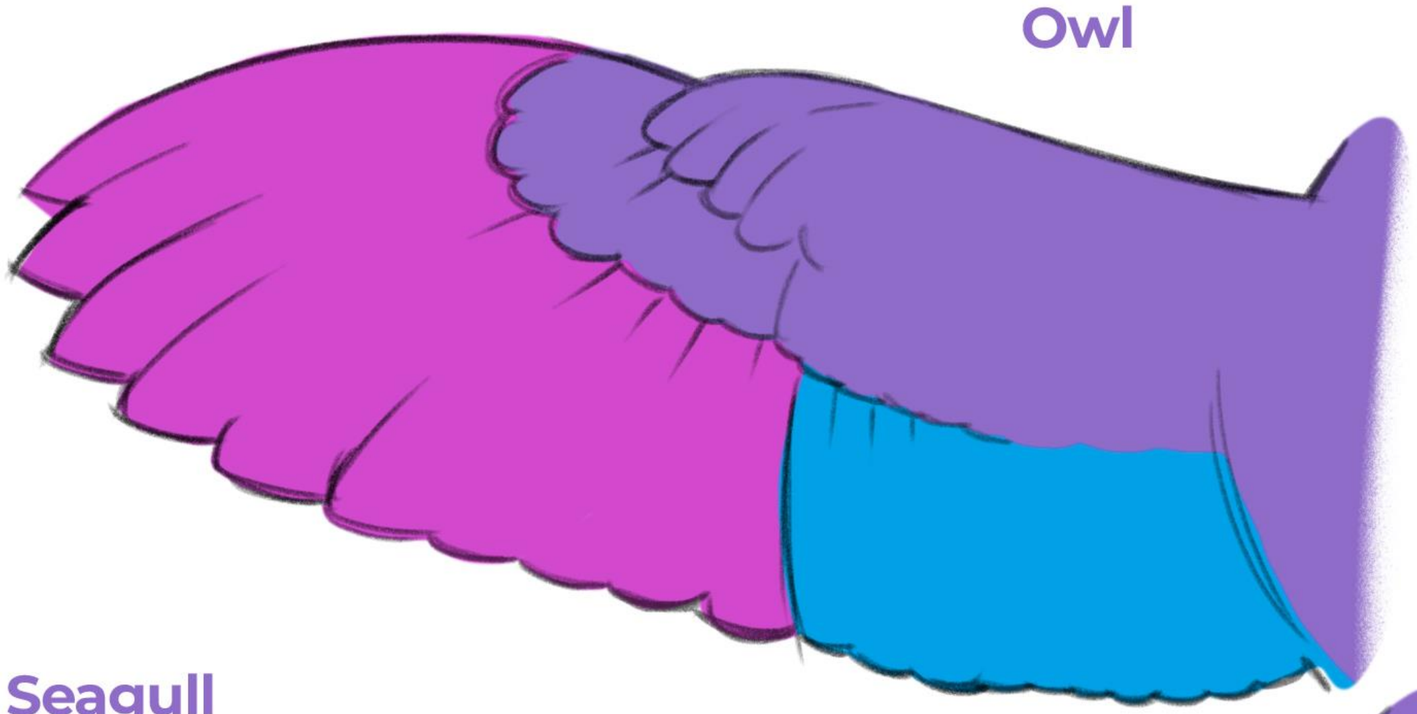
Once we understand the structure of one bird wing, we can apply the same principles to others as well.

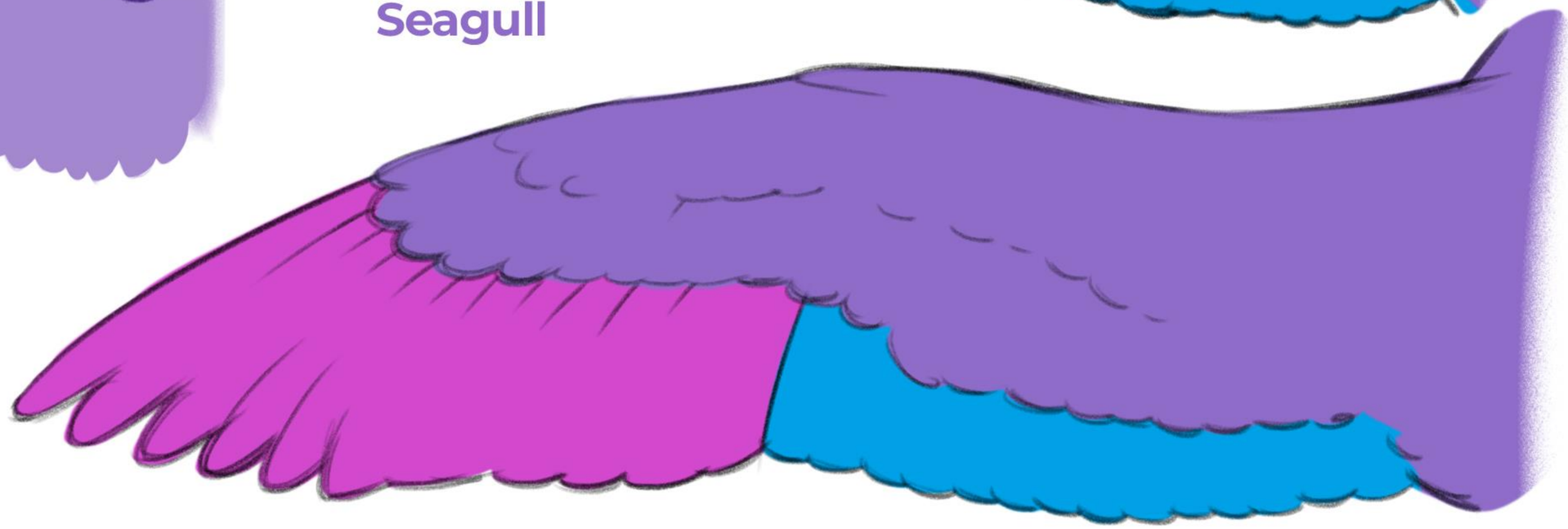
We should at least distinguish between the primaries, secondaries, and coverts.

Once you crack one piece of the puzzle, the others start to fall in place

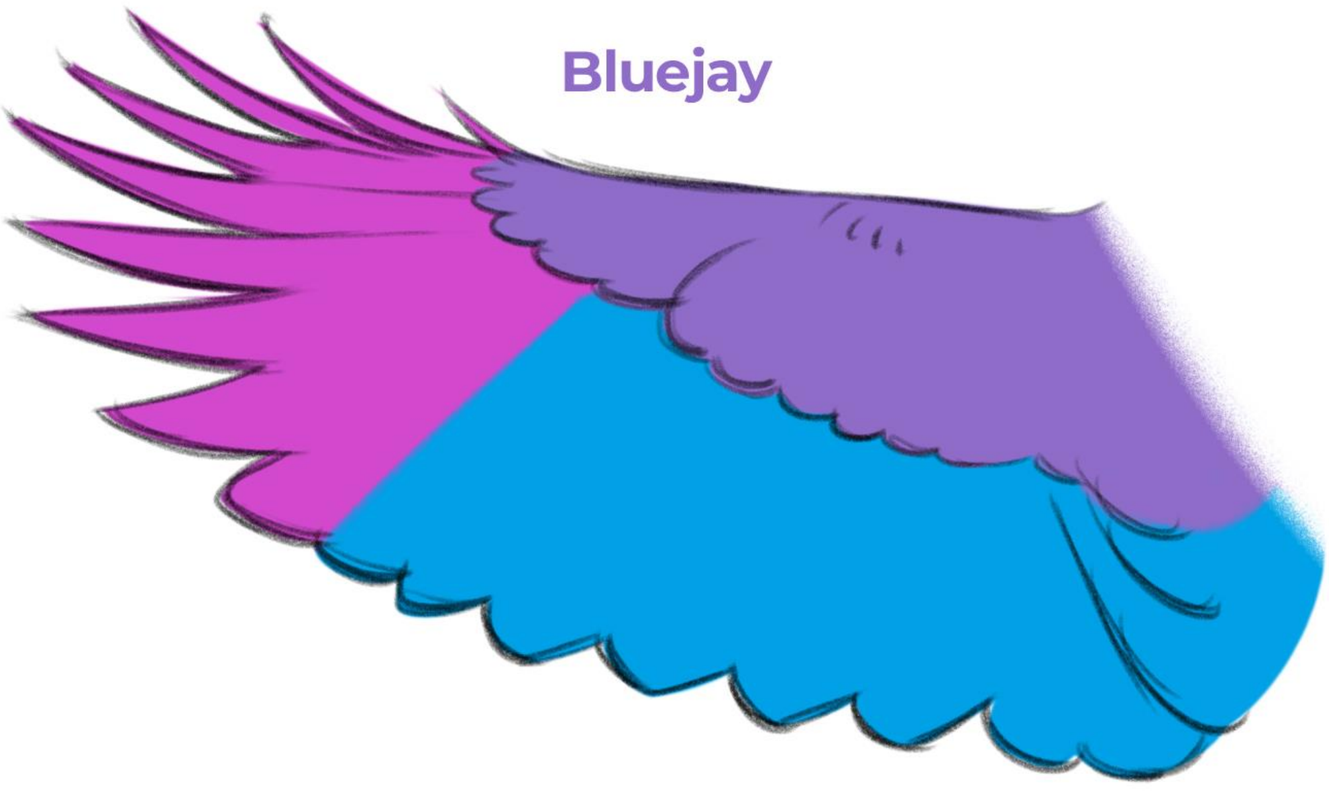
Owl



Seagull



Bluejay



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Adjusting Proportions (1/3)

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Adjusting Proportions

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Adjusting Proportions (2/3)

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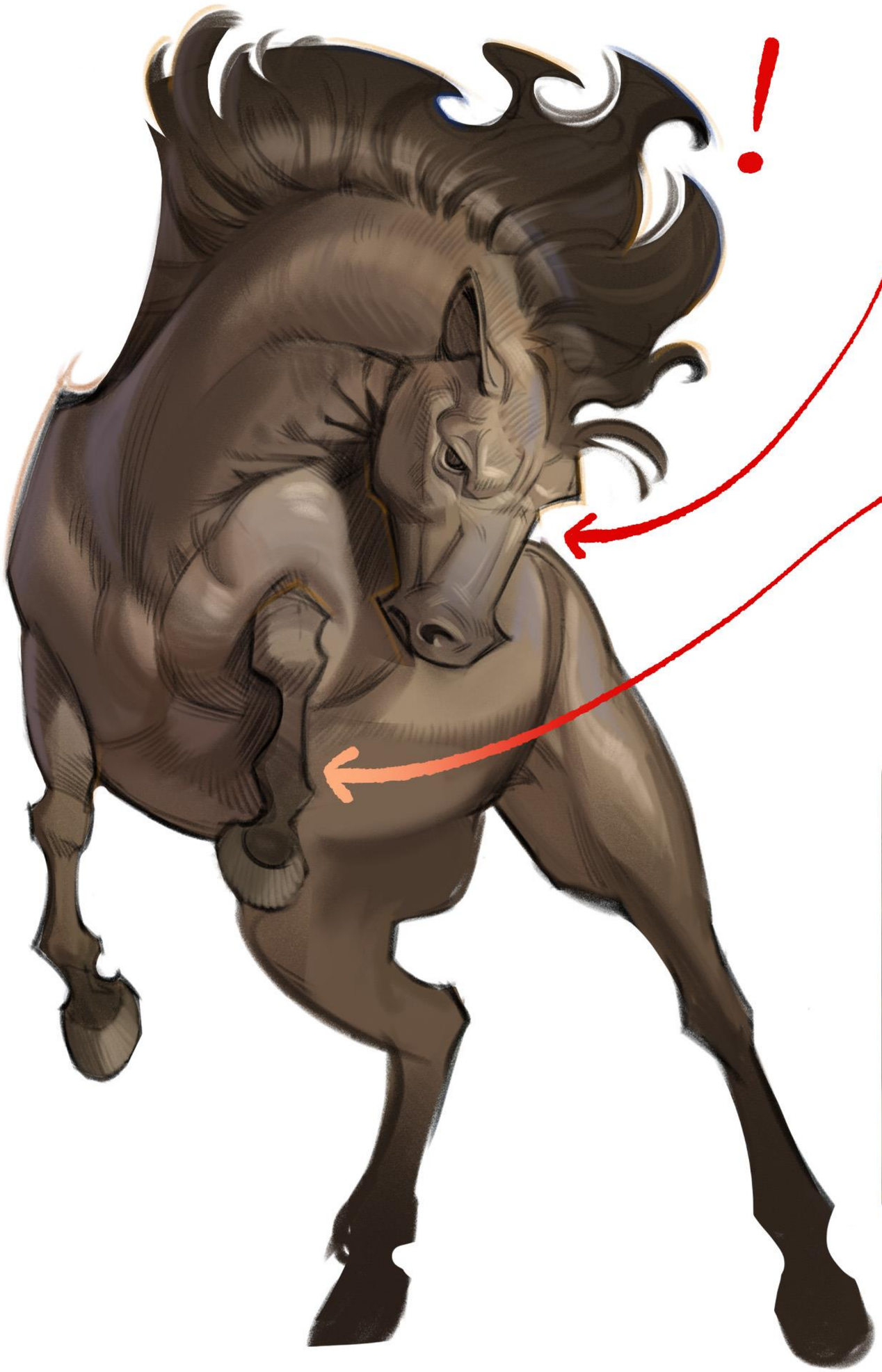
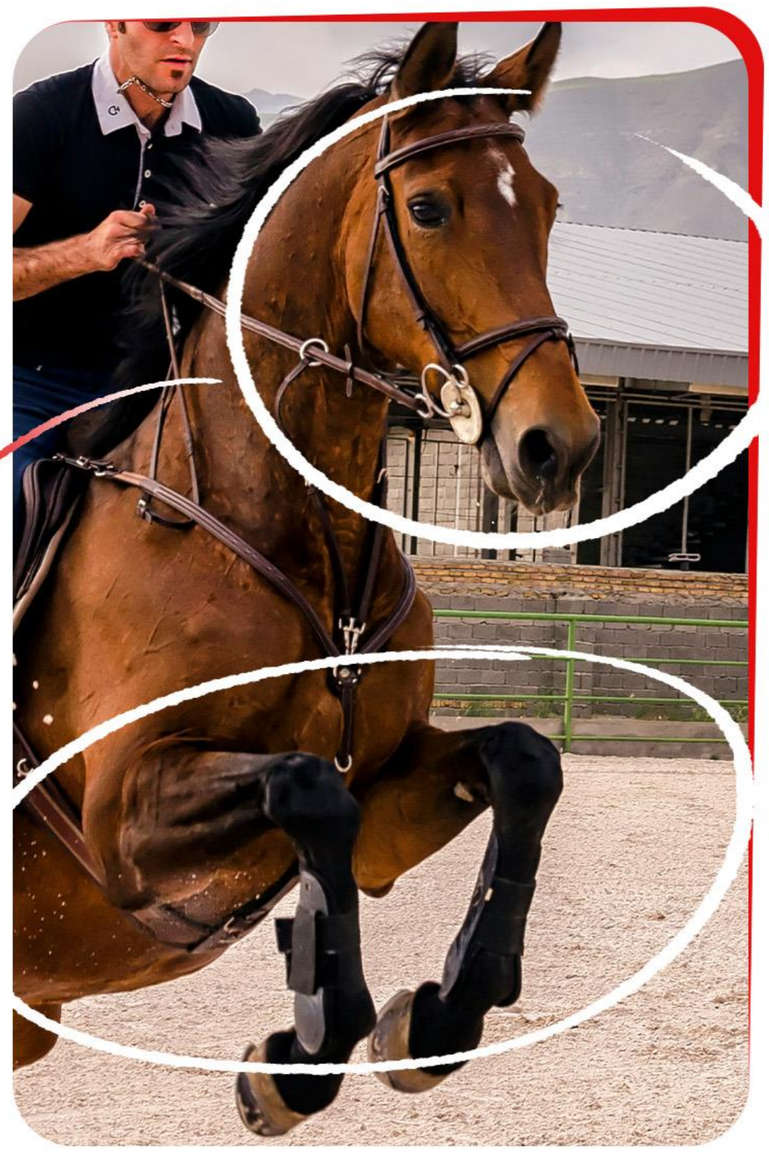
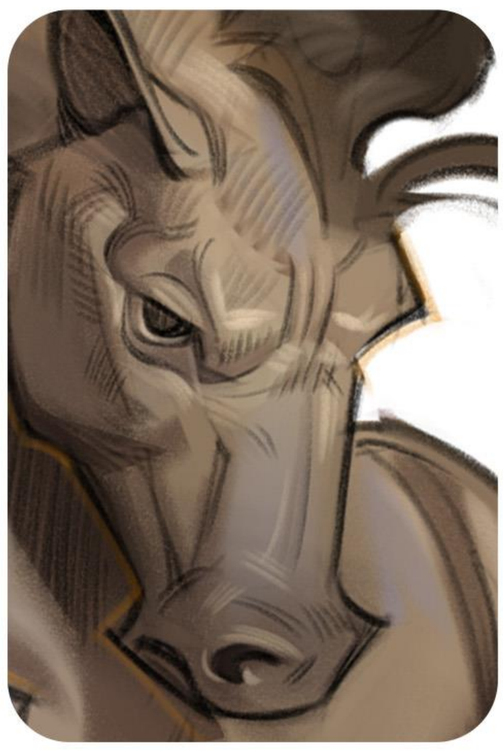
As we work on a piece, we may like the direction it's heading in, but it may also have problems that need adjusting. Fundamental elements such as proportions and anatomy will stand out like a sore thumb if they aren't done properly.





The forelimbs are too small, and the face appears too short!



Can you tell the difference?

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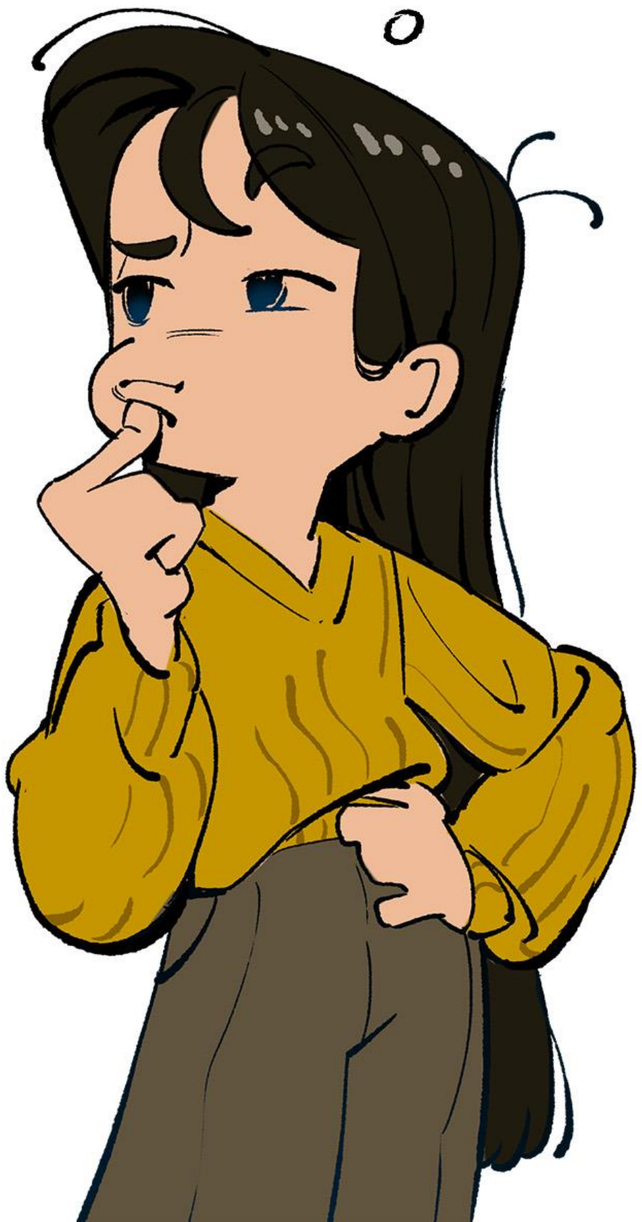
Adjusting Proportions (3/3)

Here is the refined version with the corrected proportions applied.
It keeps the stylization while respecting the horse's proportions,
which strengthens the believability.

Sometimes we develop bad habits, like making heads too small or legs too long. One way to break these habits is to force ourselves to think in the opposite way.



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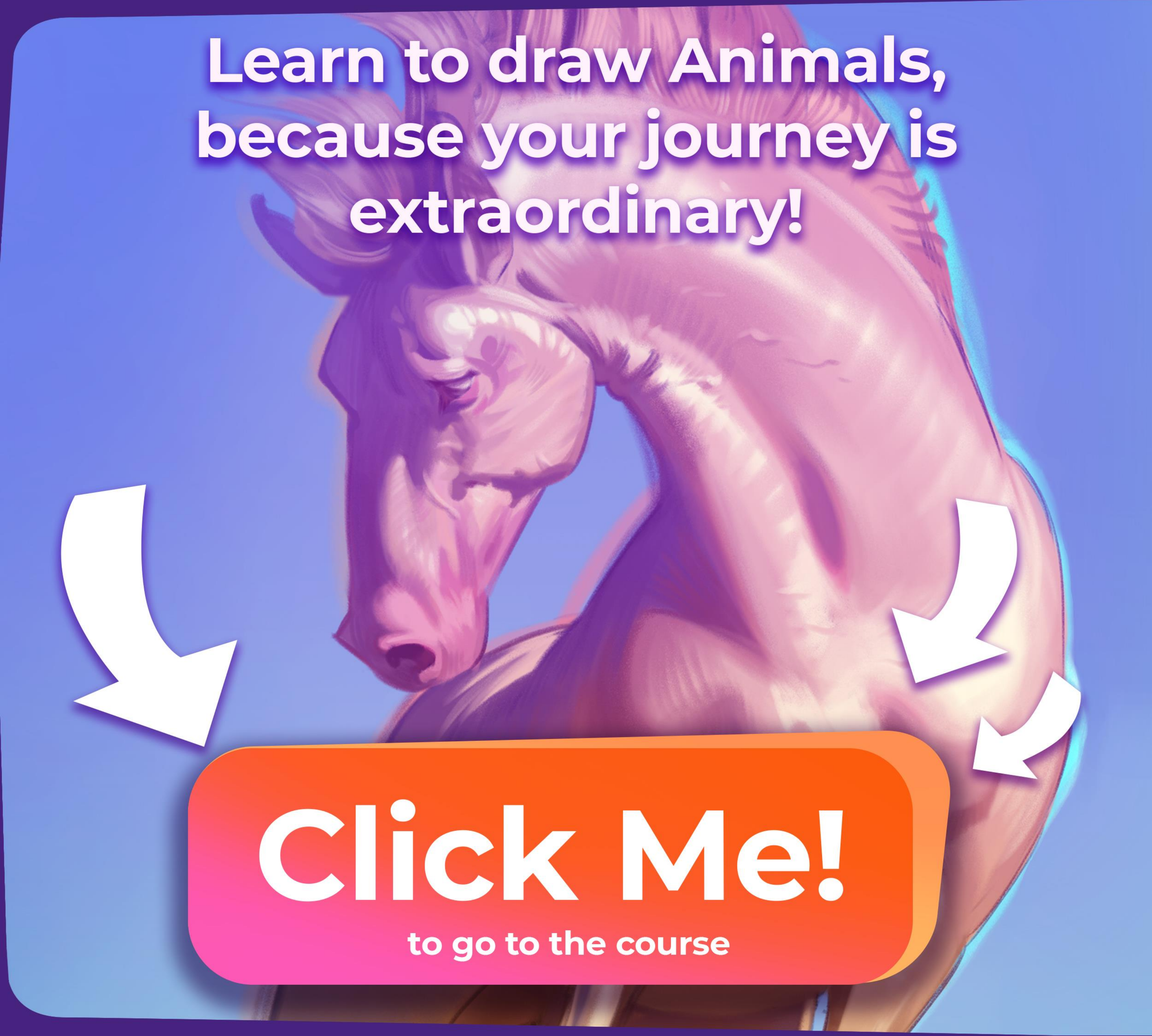

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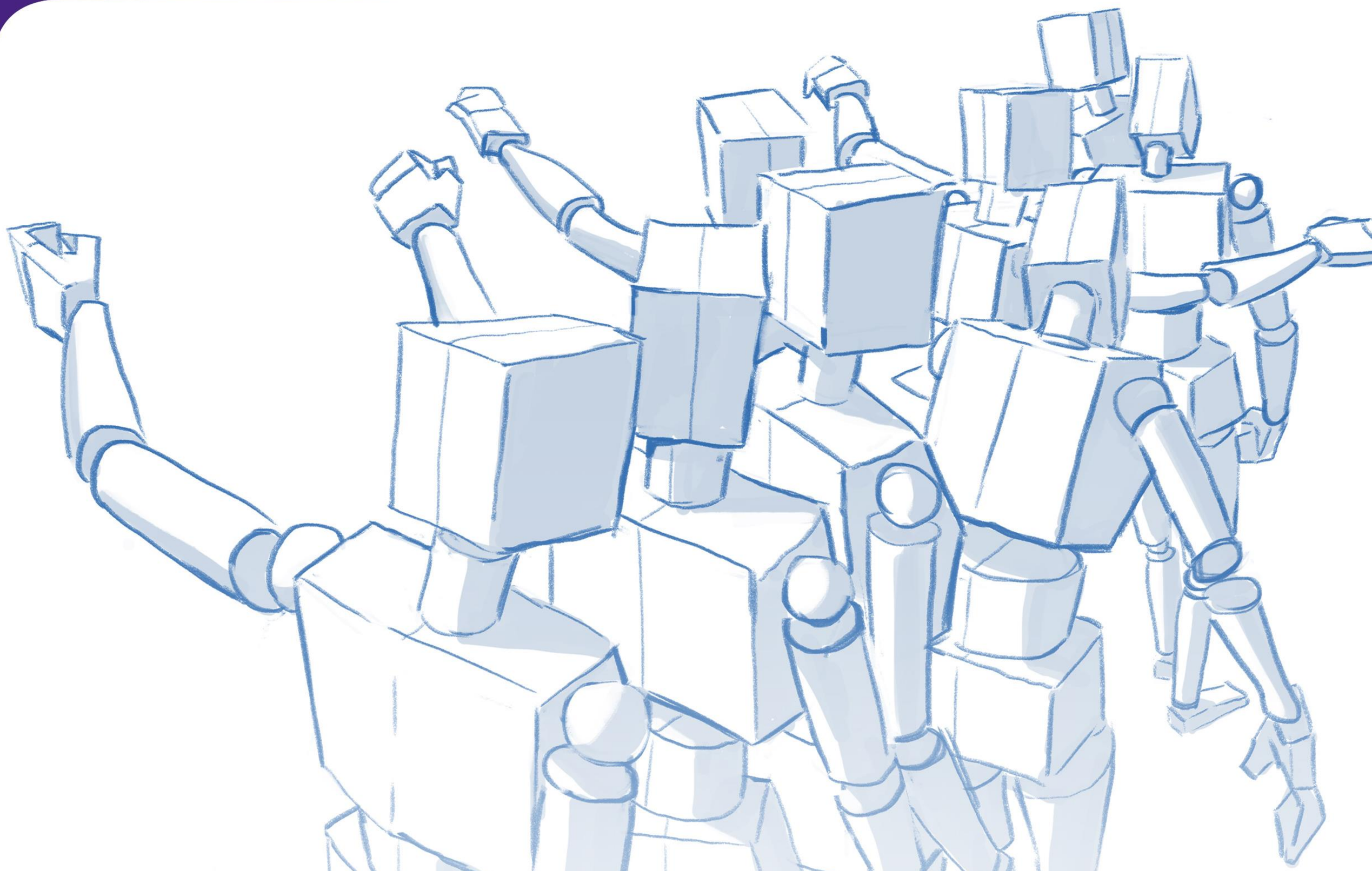

The Power of Mannequins

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The Power of Mannequins (2/4)

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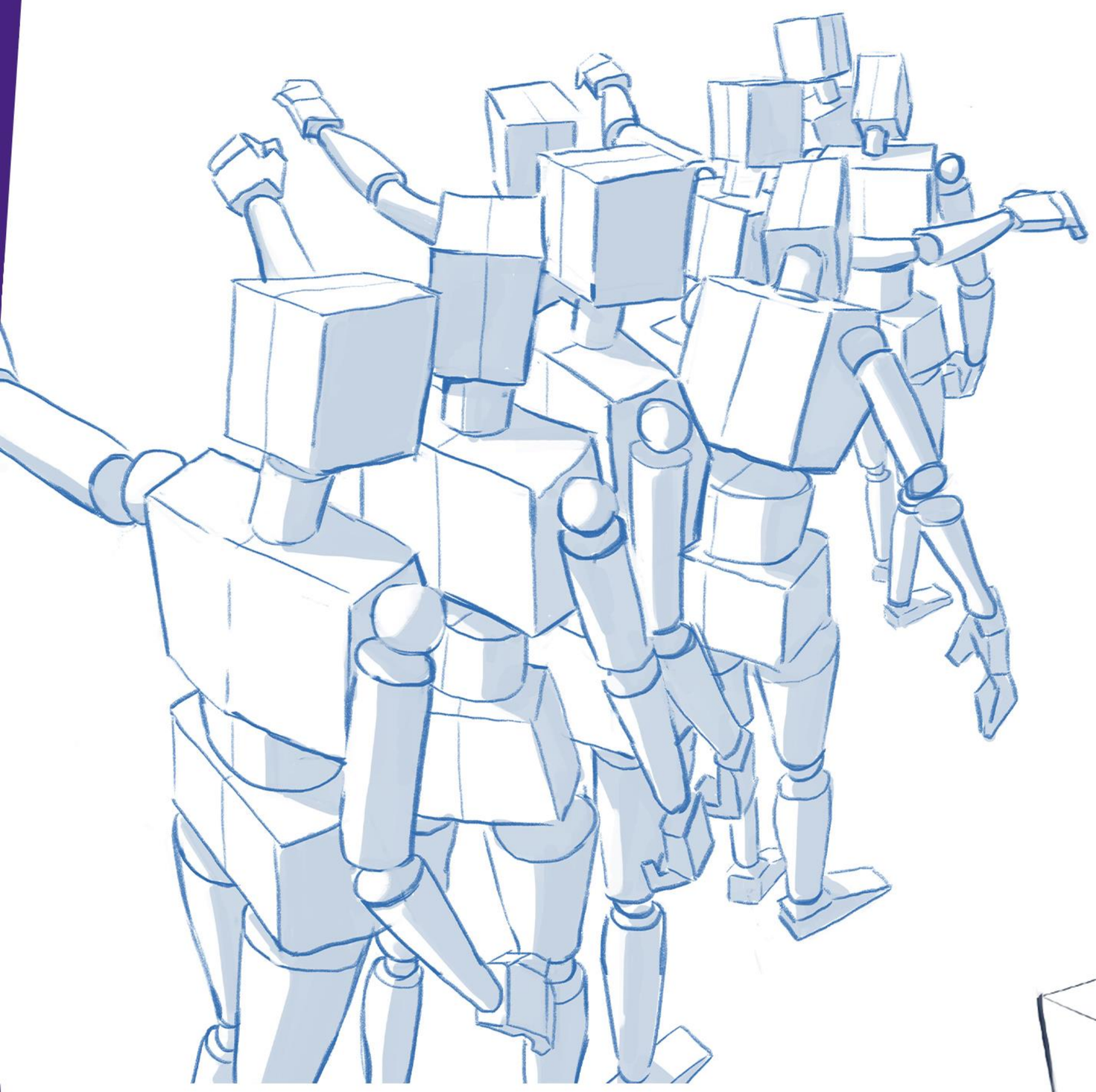
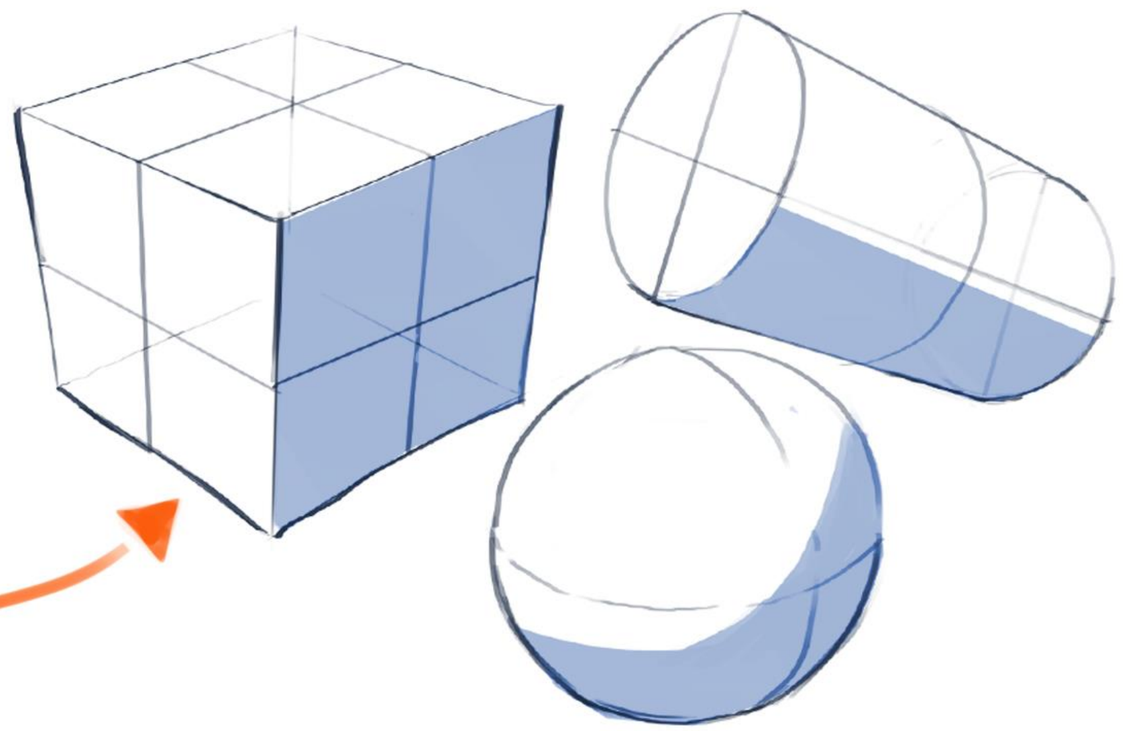


To improve sketching figures in perspective, try this exercise:

Instead of drawing from a reference directly, translate what you see into a mannequin.

This encourages you to understand the form of the subject matter, since you can't copy directly what you see.

A mannequin is a simplified figure built out of **primitive forms**. This reduces the complexity of anatomy and lets us focus on drawing believable volumes using boxes and cylinders.



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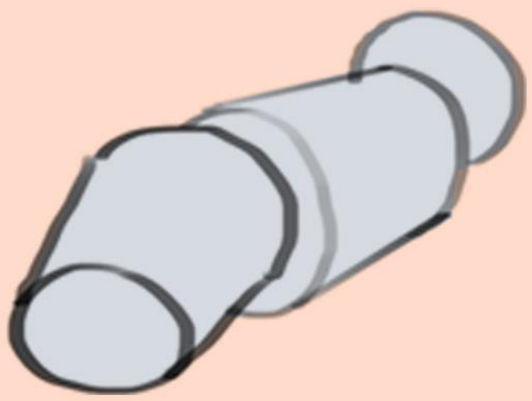
The Power of Mannequins (3/4)

Drawing a mannequin instead of a human figure directly helps us pose bodies in perspective without getting caught up by extra complexities such as anatomy.
Anatomical landmarks can be added once the figure is believably posed.

Foreshortening and overlap can be difficult to recognize. Simple forms such as cylinders can solve this problem.



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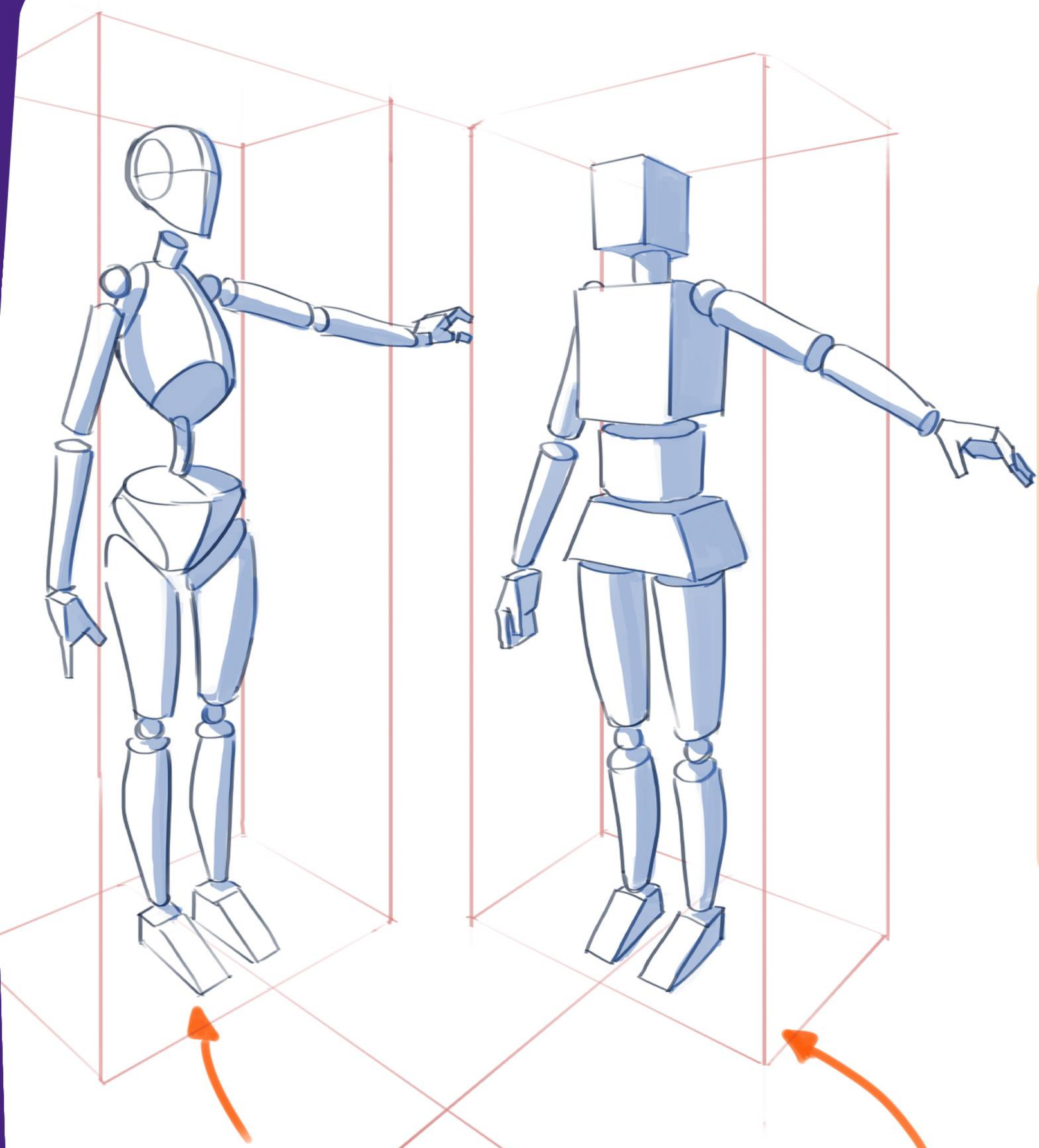
The Power of Mannequins (4/4)



There is no strict form or approach we need to follow. Forms can be modified and adjusted to fit personal preferences and workflows.
The goal is simplicity.

Mannequin using round forms to mimic the human skeleton.

Mannequin using boxes to recognize perspective easier.

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Not the skeleton in your closet, but a way to draw it. Useful both in sci-fi and fantasy.

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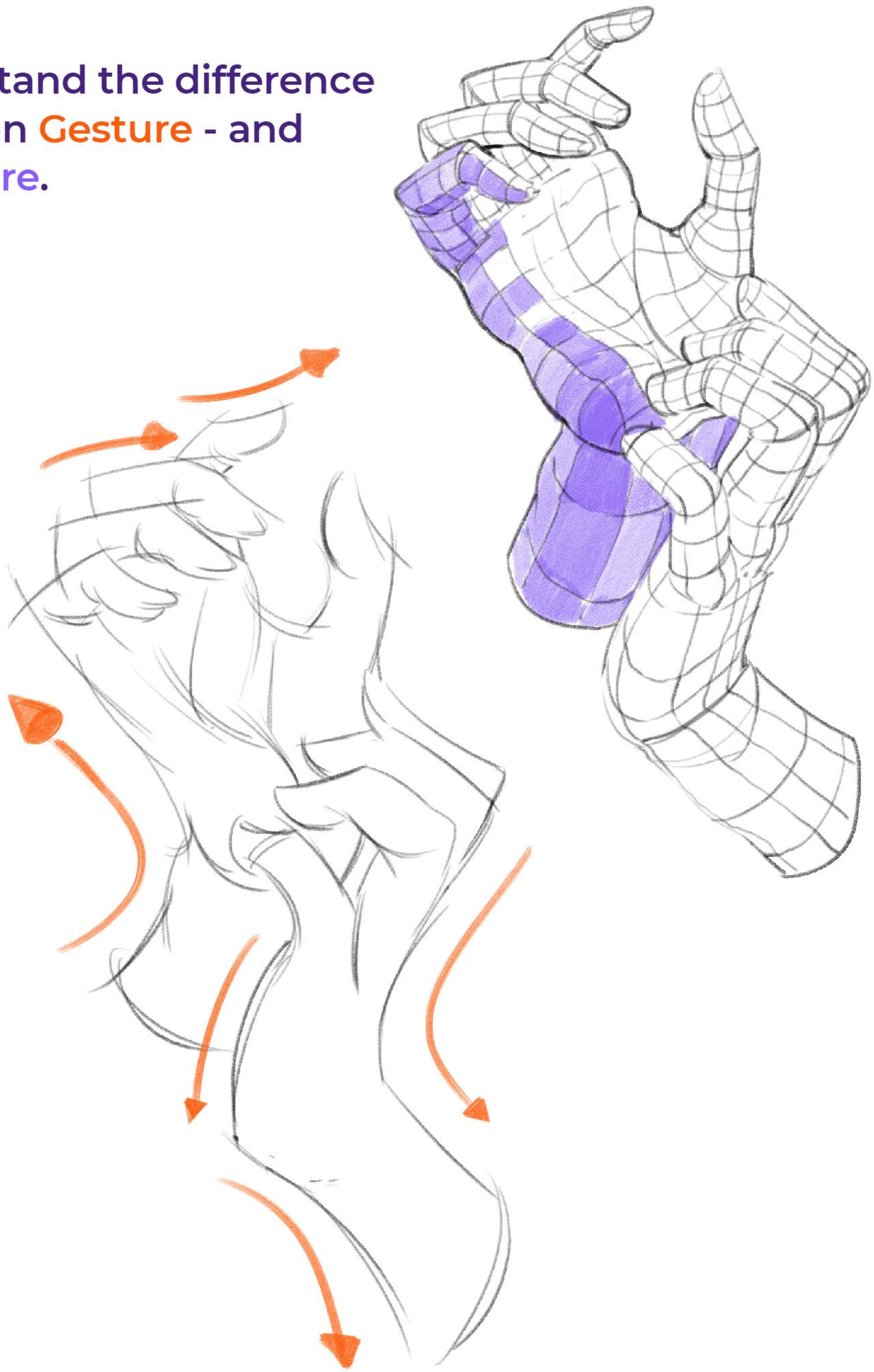
Painting Hands

Tips on Structure vs Gesture

Let us understand the basics

Reference

Understand the difference between Gesture - and Structure.



Gesture is flowy, usually we check how much we want to push. In our case, we keep a relationship with proportion.

Structure pays attention to how planes are created, and how they wrap around on the hands.

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Painting Hands (3/4)

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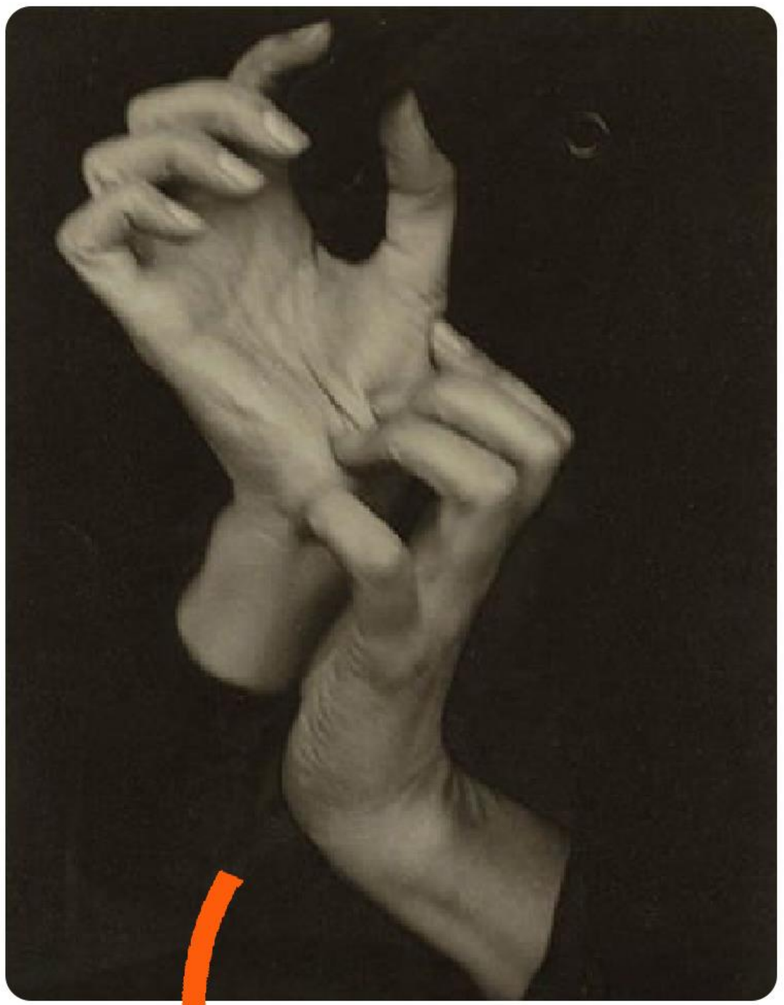
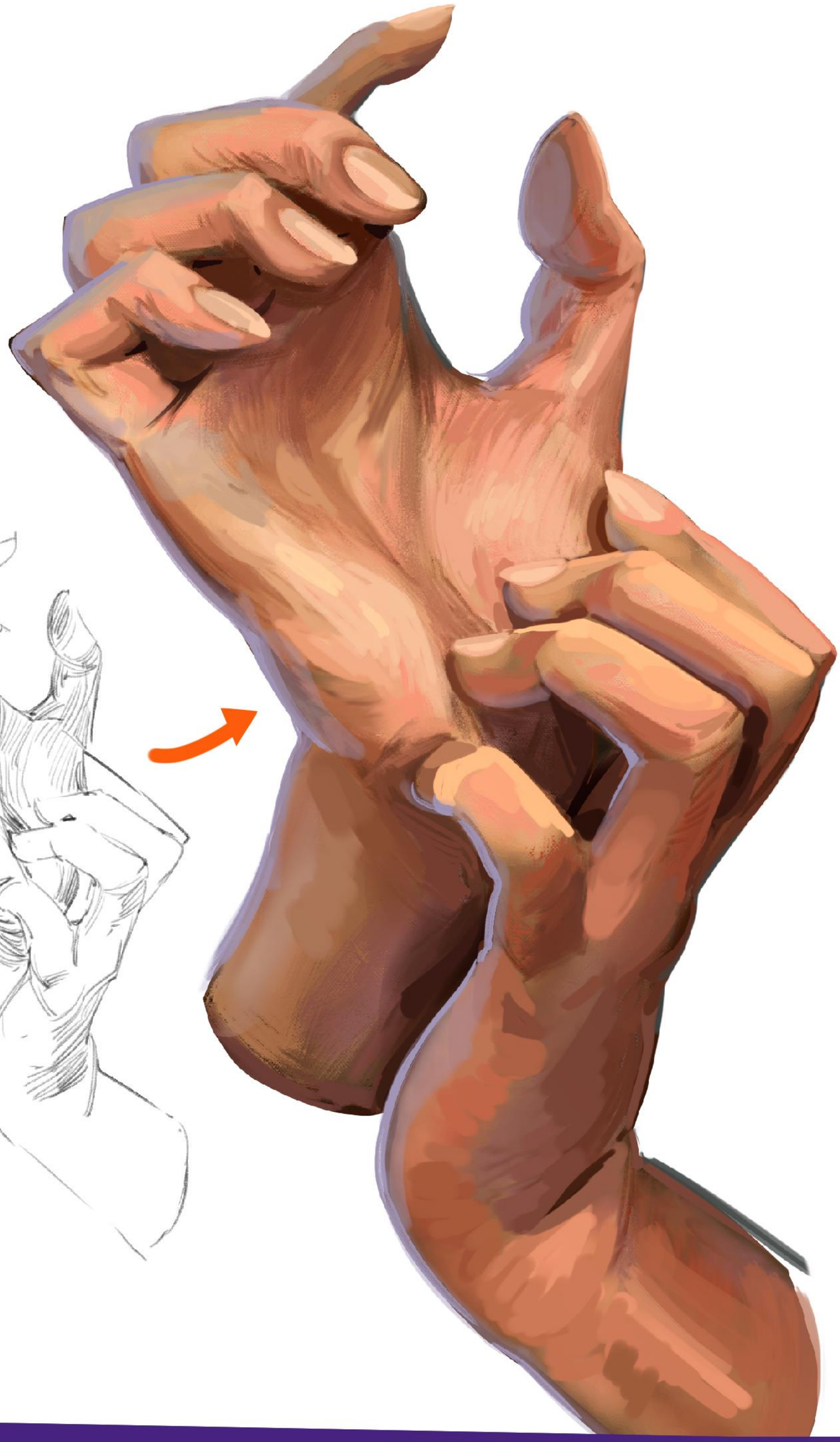


Here you make sure that you clarify your color palette choice, since our reference is black & white.



Color Palette

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Painting Hands (4/4)

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From poles to pipes and even a labyrinth, the cylinder remains a necessity.

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Volumes and Forms

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Volumes and Forms (2/4)

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When designing for a 3D space, it's important to clearly communicate form by reinforcing edges, bevels, and volume.

In this ***stylized*** robotic arm, the metal plates are exaggerated to emphasize that.

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Volumes and Forms (3/4)

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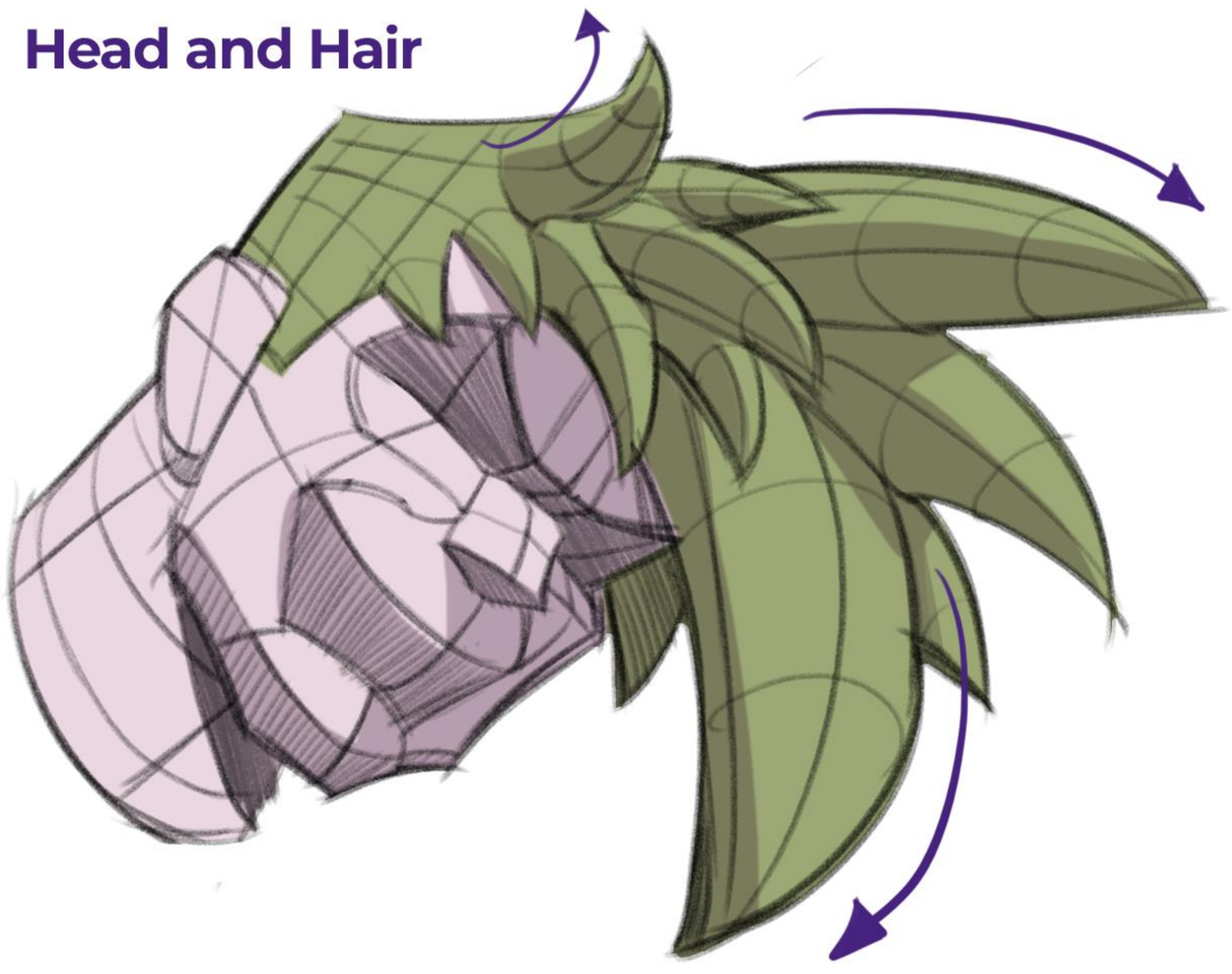
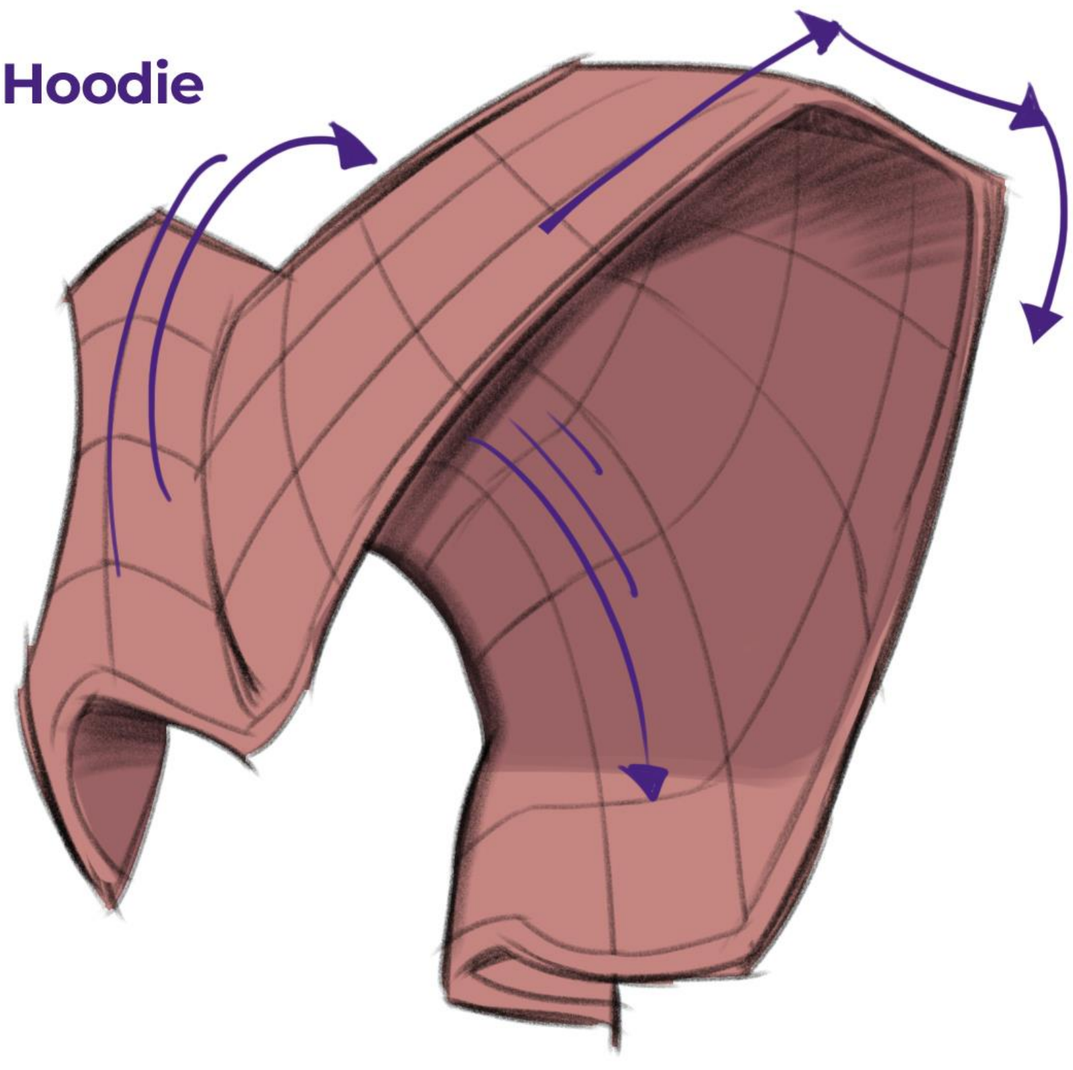
Think about the forms and how they overlap each other.

Consider their movement and orientation in space, so they feel like they're moving toward or away from us in 3D.

Head and Hair



Hoodie



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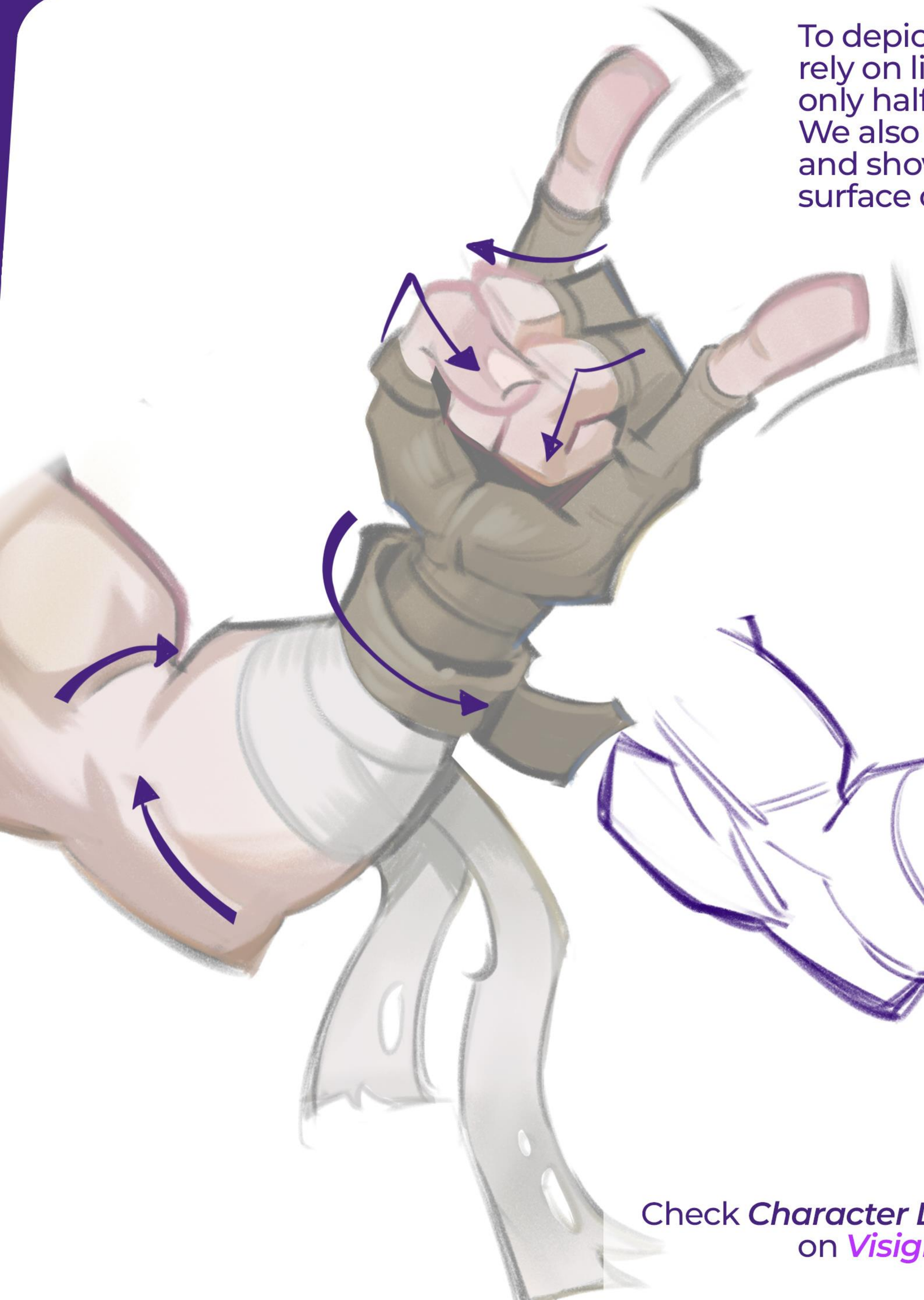
Volumes and Forms (4/4)

To depict forms accurately, we can't rely on light and shadow alone - that's only half the battle.
We also need to draw forms clearly and show how contours follow the surface consistently in perspective.



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Simplicity is hard - the only thing different is that we made it easier.

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Animal Form Study (1/4)

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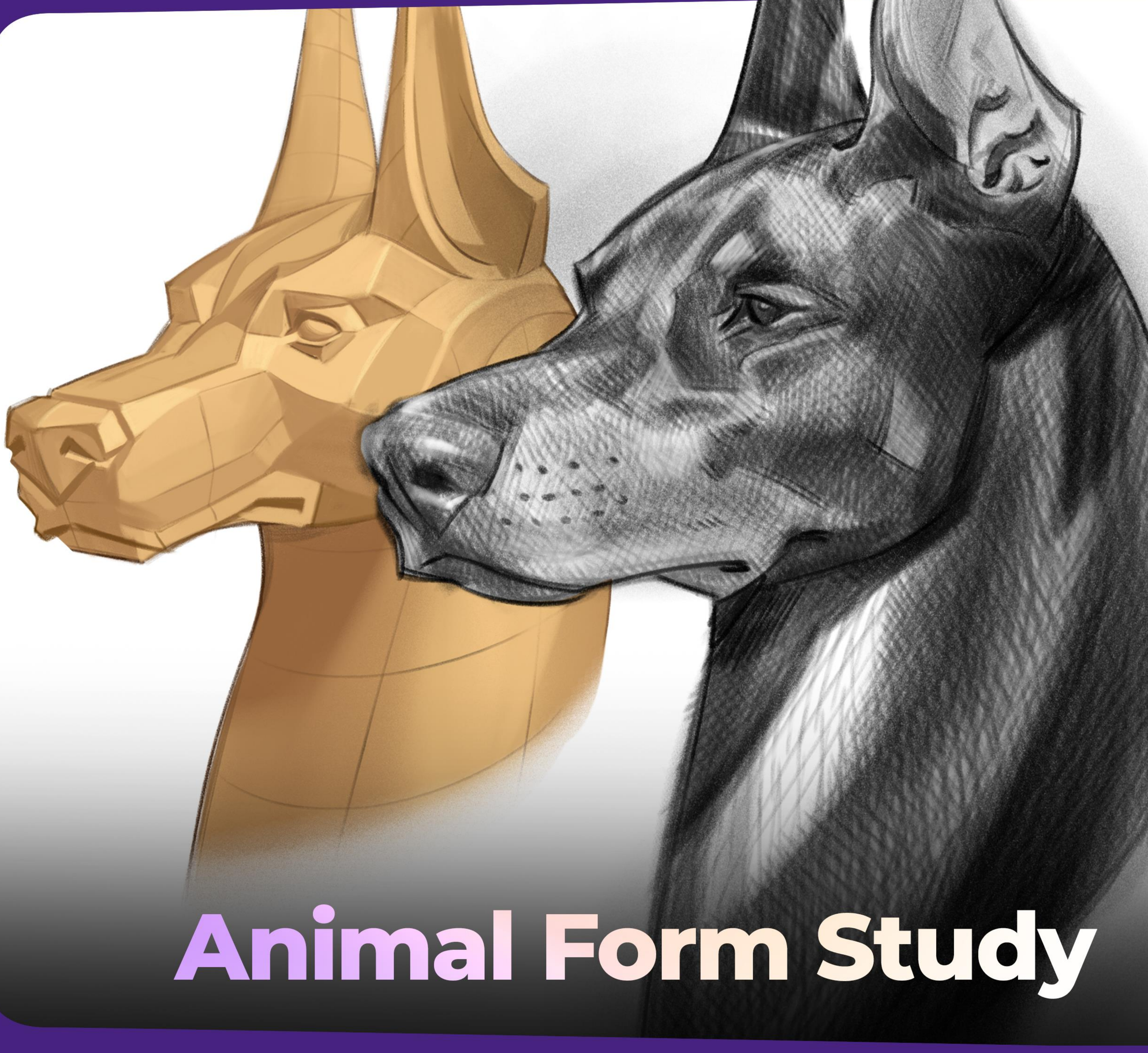

Animal Form Study

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Animal Form Study (2/4)

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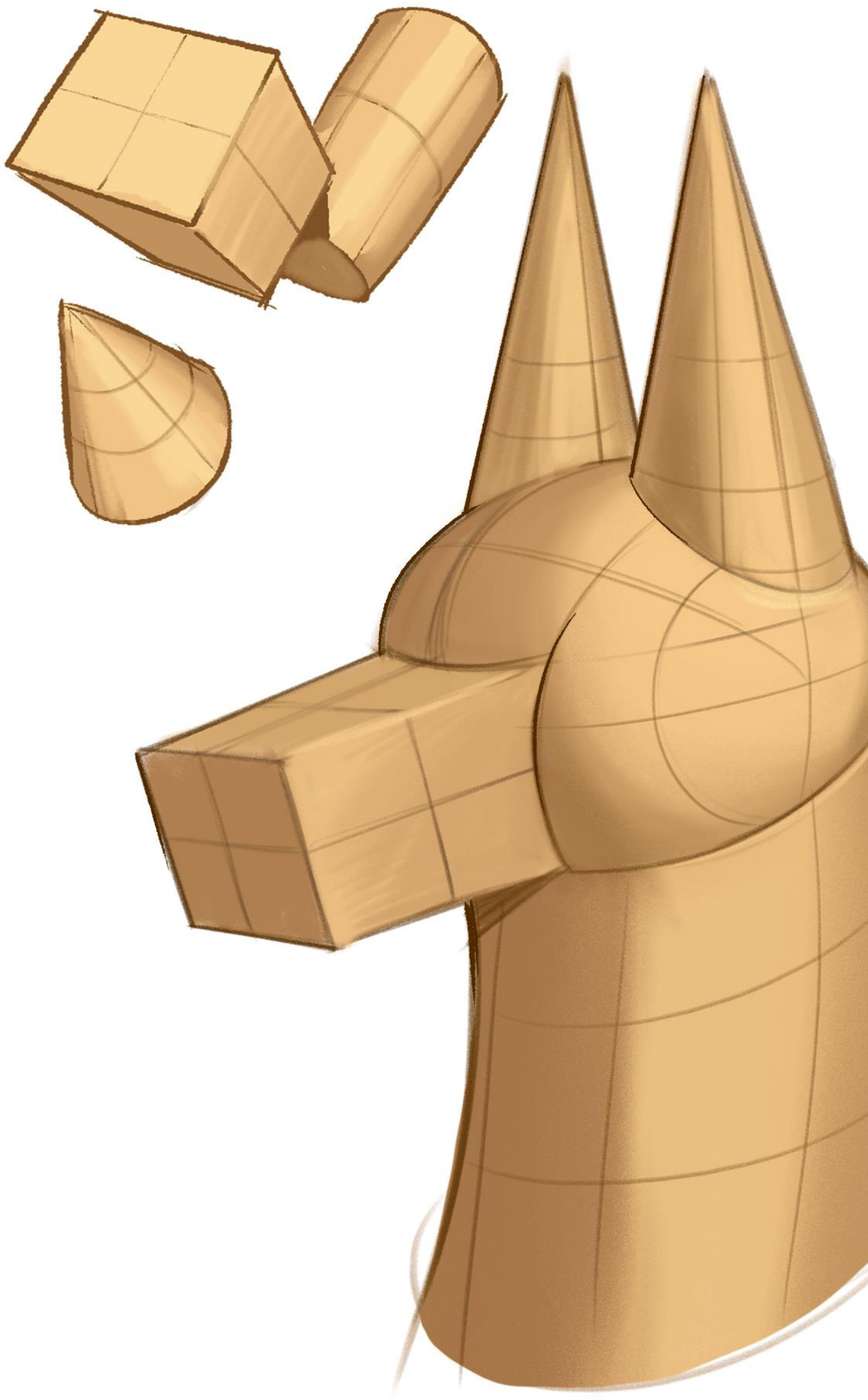
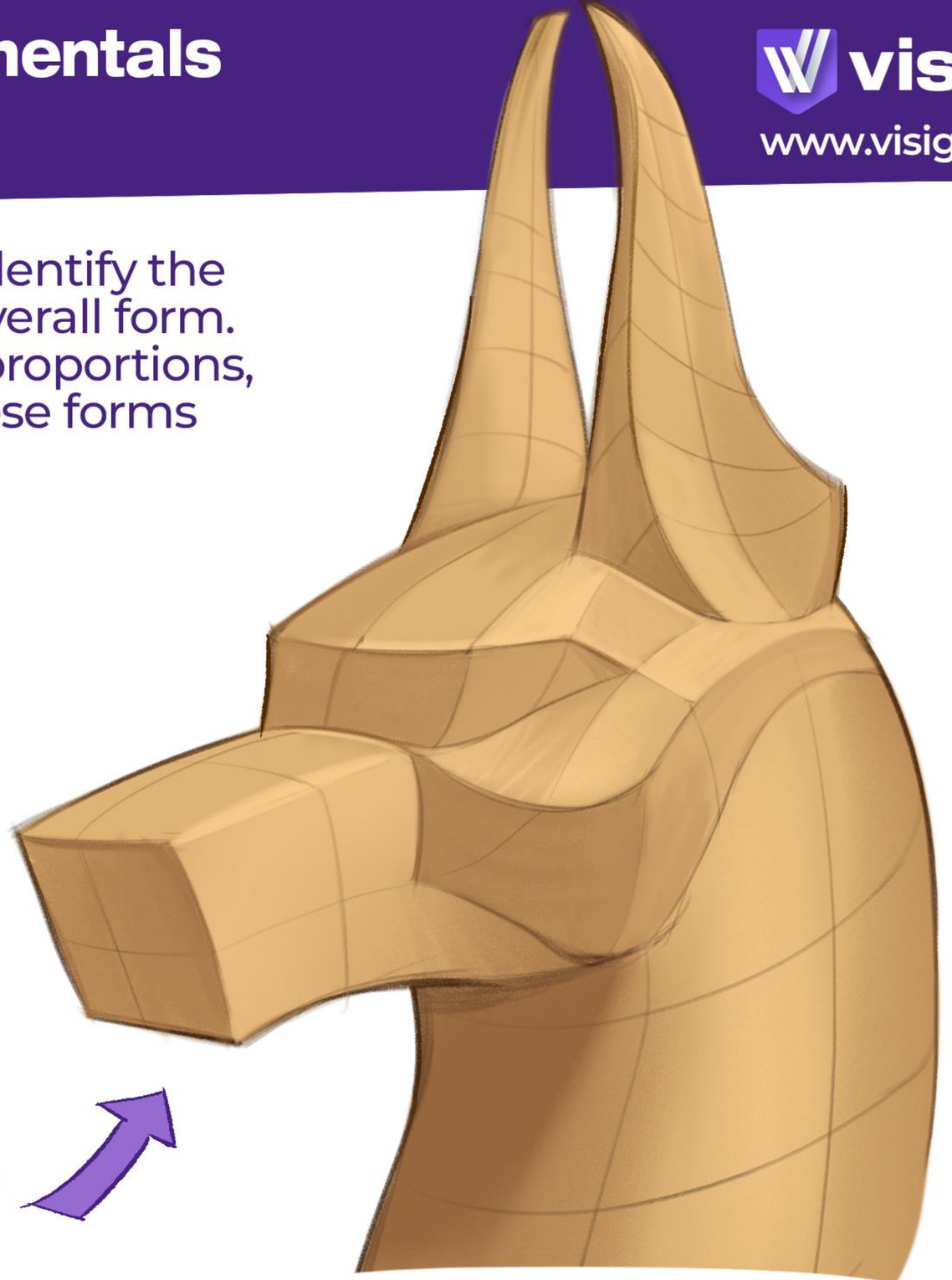
When studying any animal, it's wise to identify the basic building blocks that make up its overall form. This helps you become familiar with its proportions, which is crucial. We can then modify these forms afterwards.





Remember, as artists, we should simplify first and then gradually add detail over time.

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Animal Form Study (3/4)

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As we get the major forms down, we can start to ‘carve out’ the shapes. This helps us visualize our drawings in three-dimensional space.

When studying something specific, we should be critical of how we handle proportions. This is why working with simple forms is important, it not only improves accuracy but also serves as a humbling exercise.

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Animal Form Study (4/4)

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Working with simple forms helps isolate the study to focus on major proportions, one of the key fundamentals that make a drawing or painting feel believable.

Once we get the proportions right, we can begin to add details.

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Dynamic Perspective

Proximity and Angle

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Dynamic Perspective (2/4)

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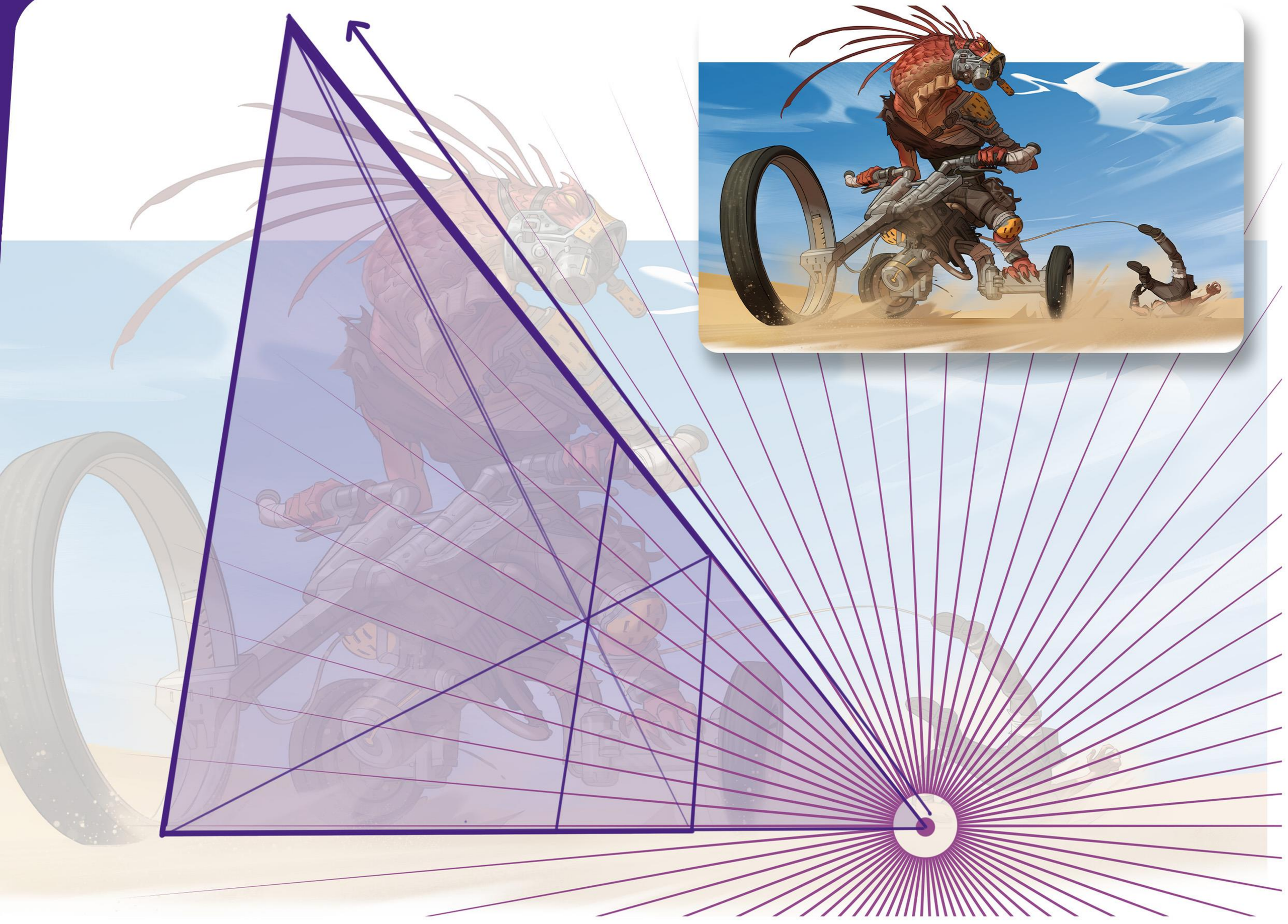

What makes a scene look dynamic? Many factors contribute, but two key elements used here are **proximity perspective** and **viewing angle**, both of which add visual tension. A solid understanding of one-point perspective can already make a big difference.

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Dynamic Perspective (3/4)

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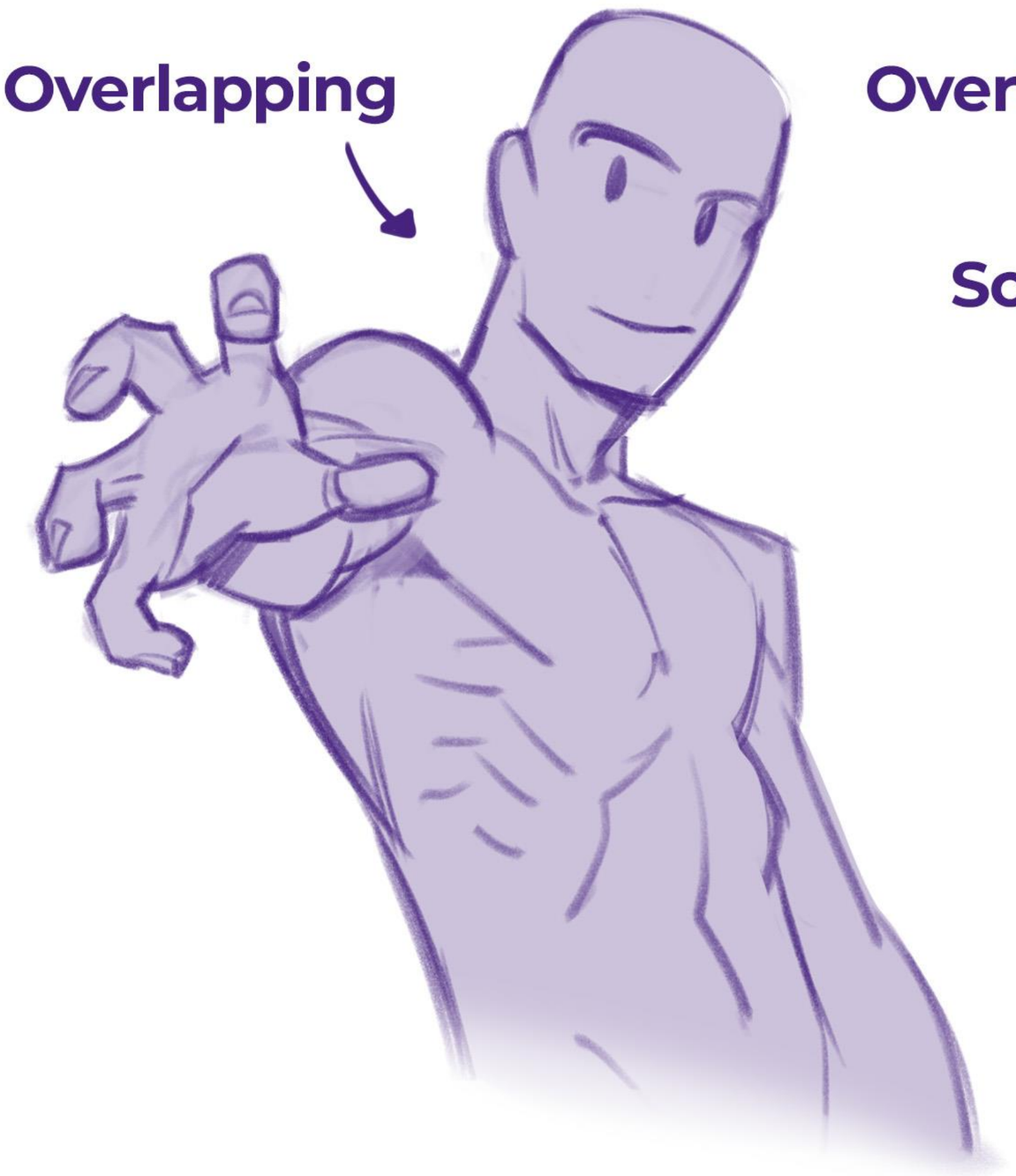
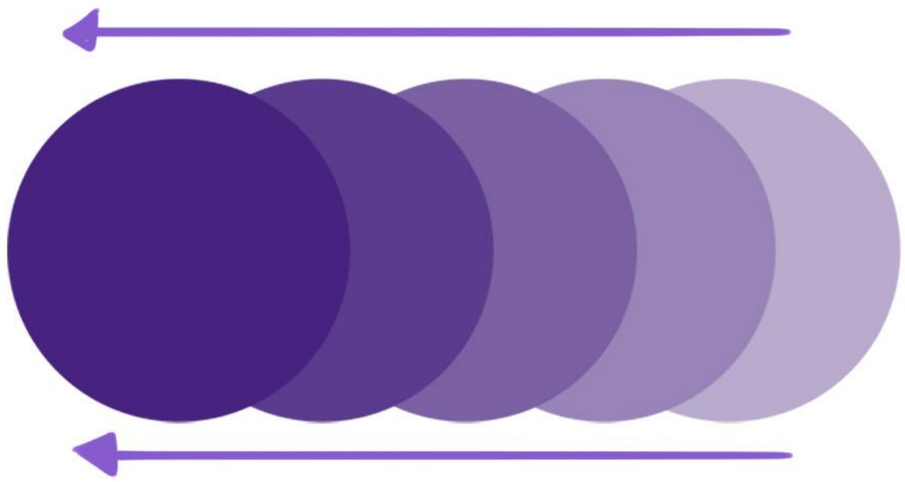
Many dynamic artworks use a technique called **'proximity perspective,'** where objects appear larger as they get closer to the viewer through scaling and overlapping.

Overlapping

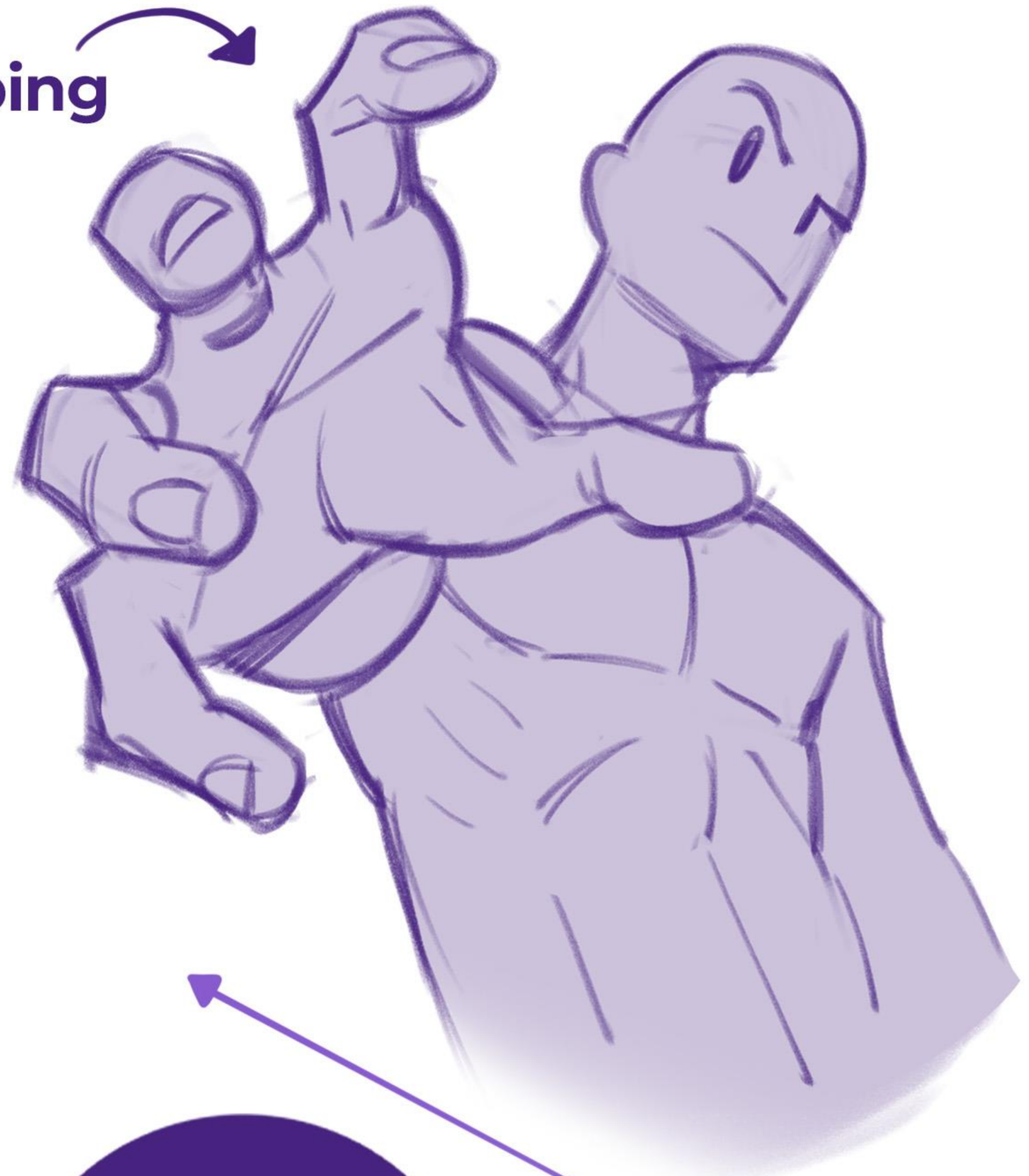


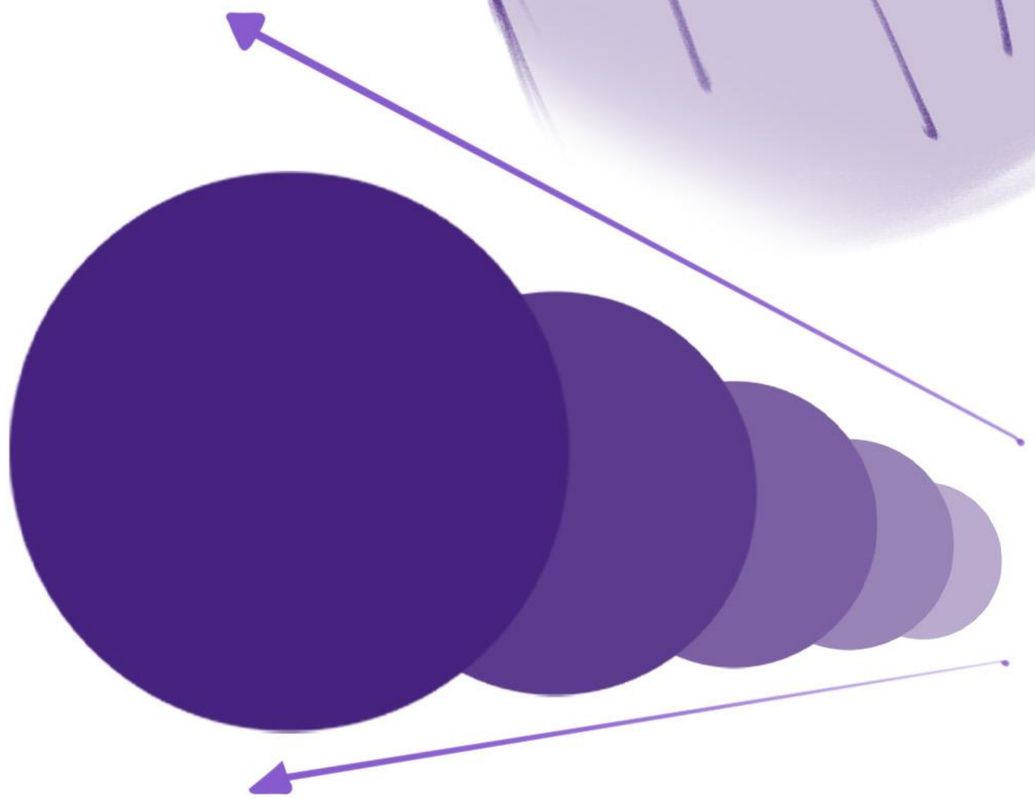


Overlapping

+

Scale





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Dynamic Perspective (4/4)

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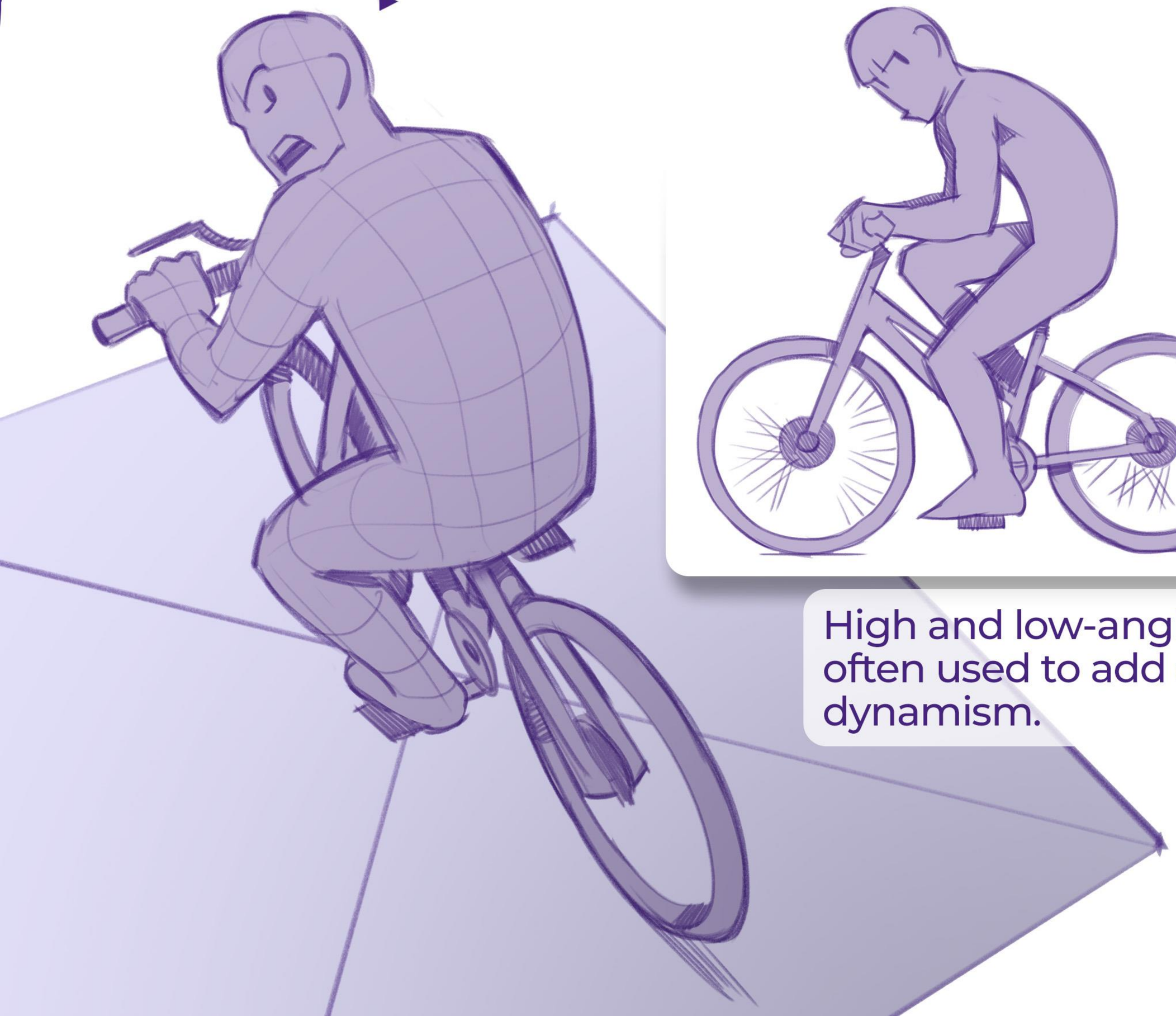
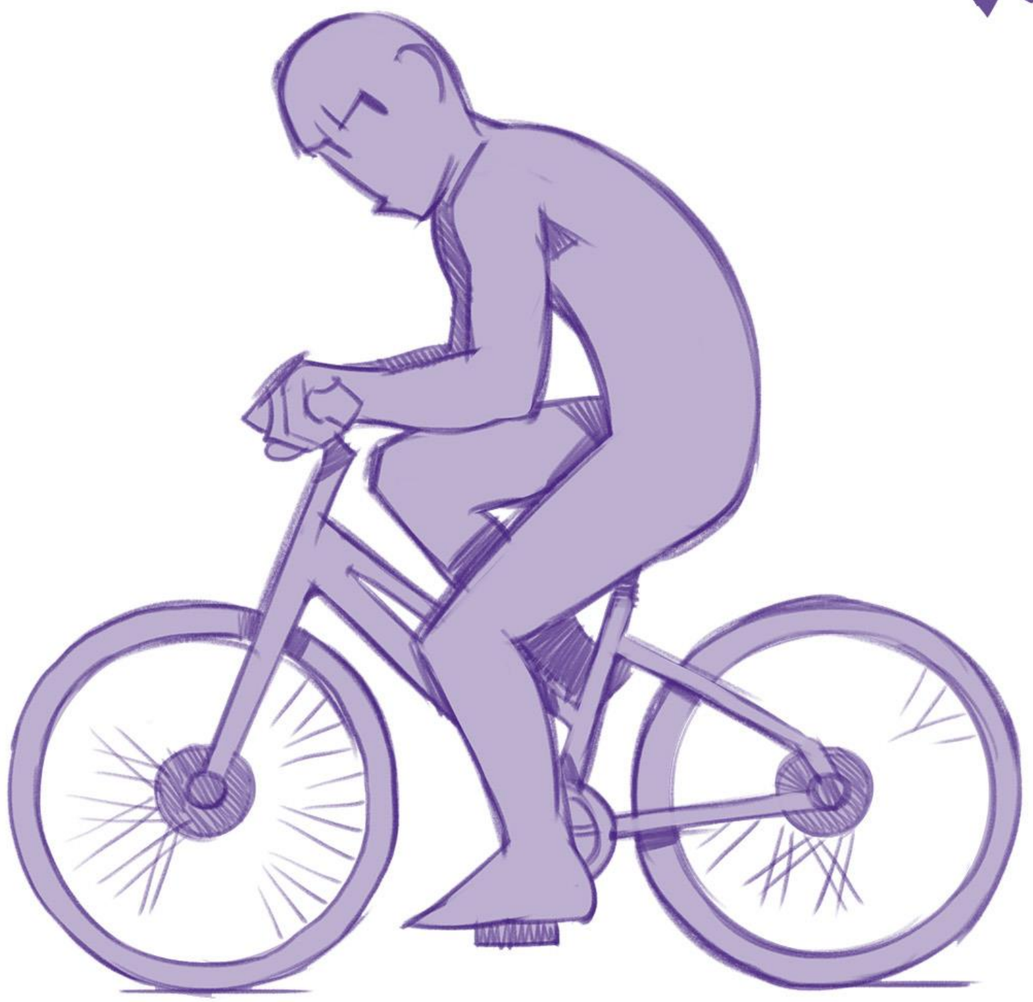
Viewing angle, or camera angle is very important for composition in general. Before drawing, consider where the 'camera' is placed in the scene, as this affects perspective and storytelling.

Camera

Camera POV:





High and low-angle shots are often used to add drama and dynamism.

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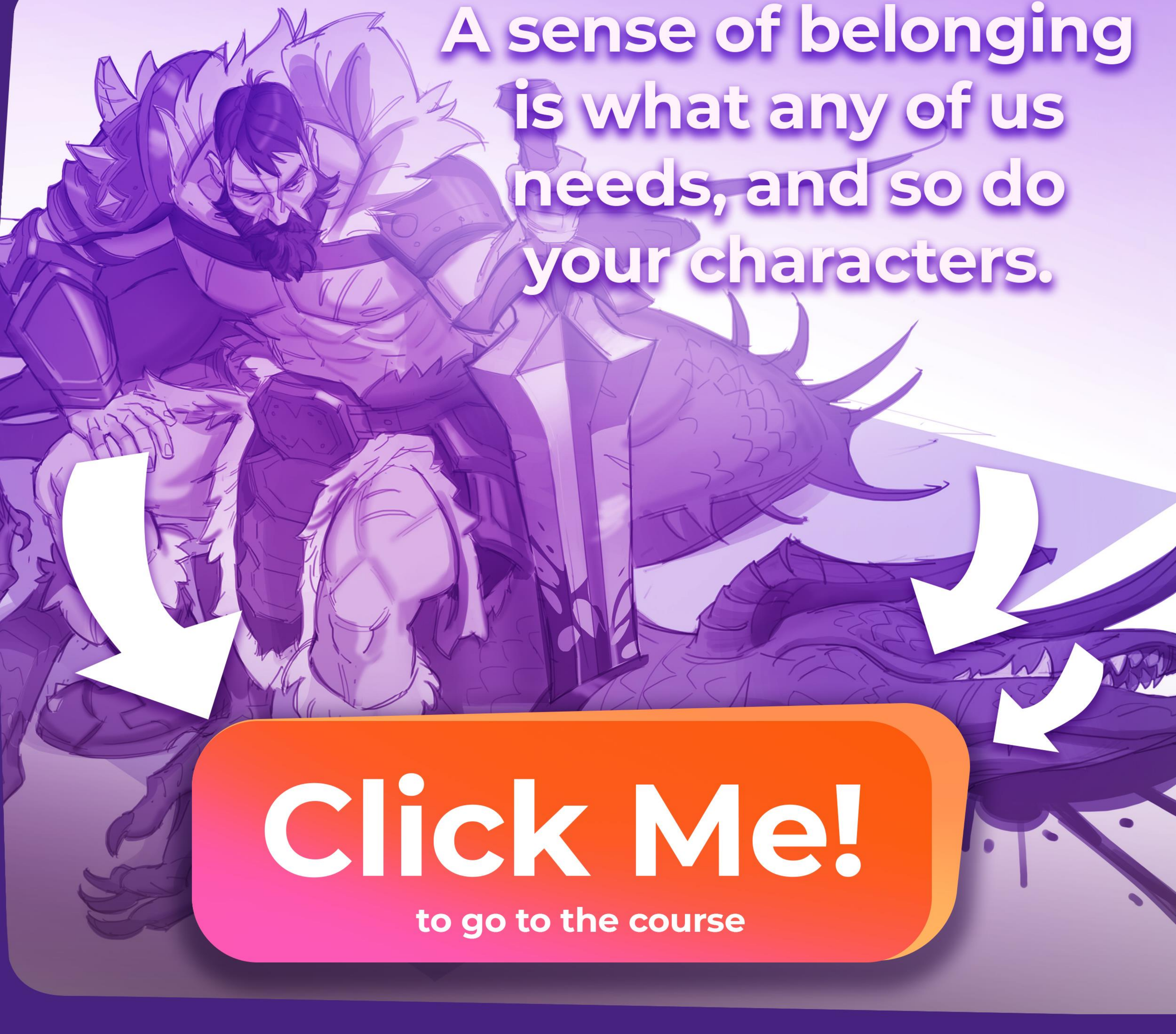

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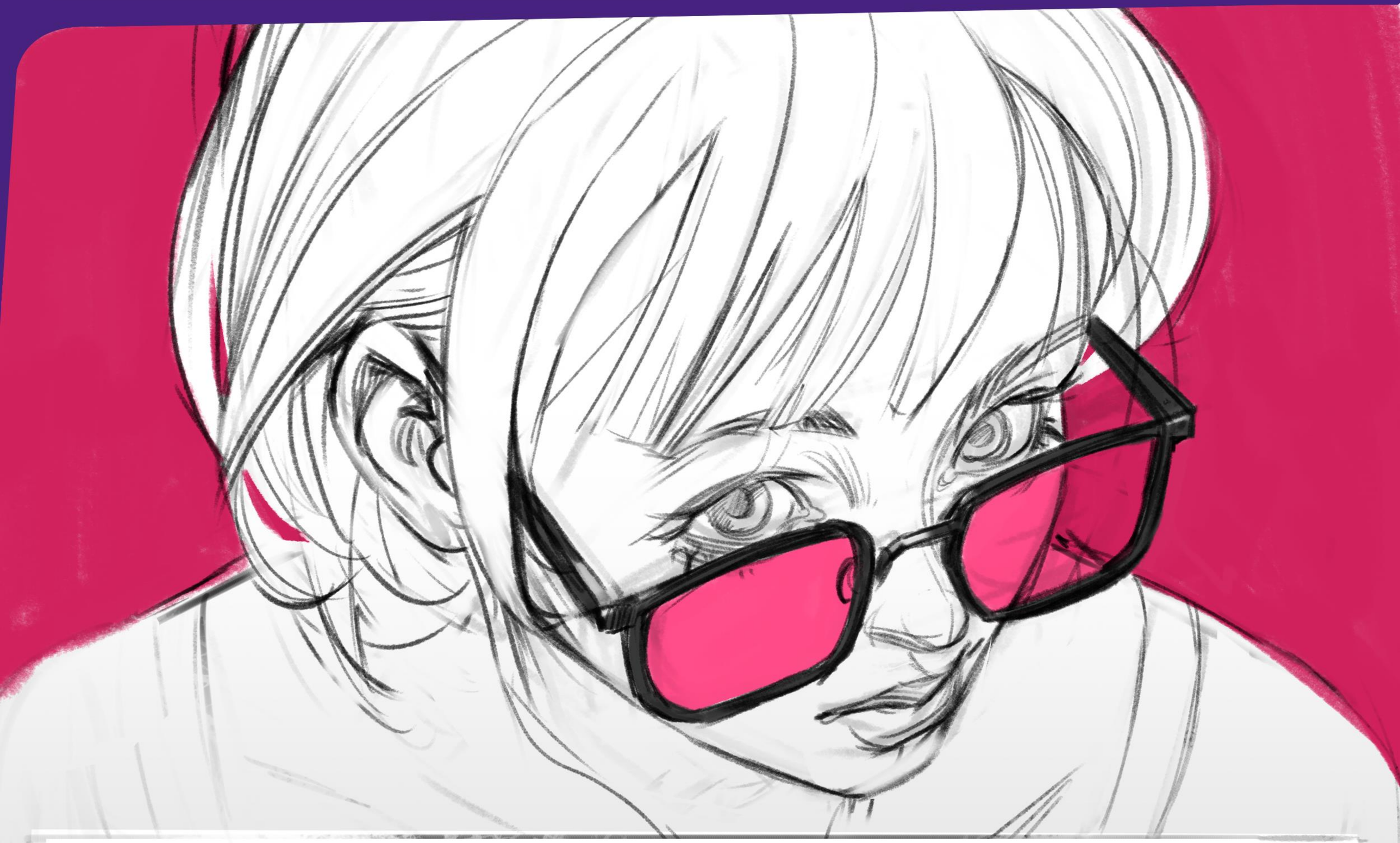

Sketching Glasses

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Sketching Glasses (2/3)

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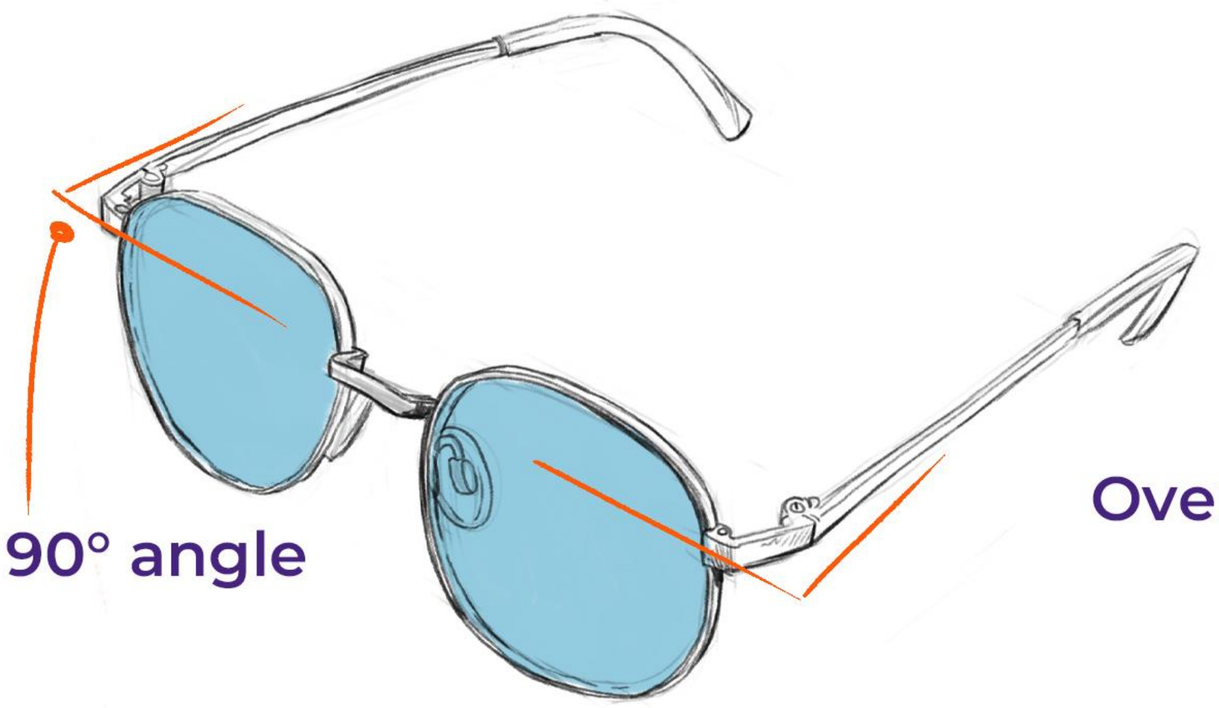

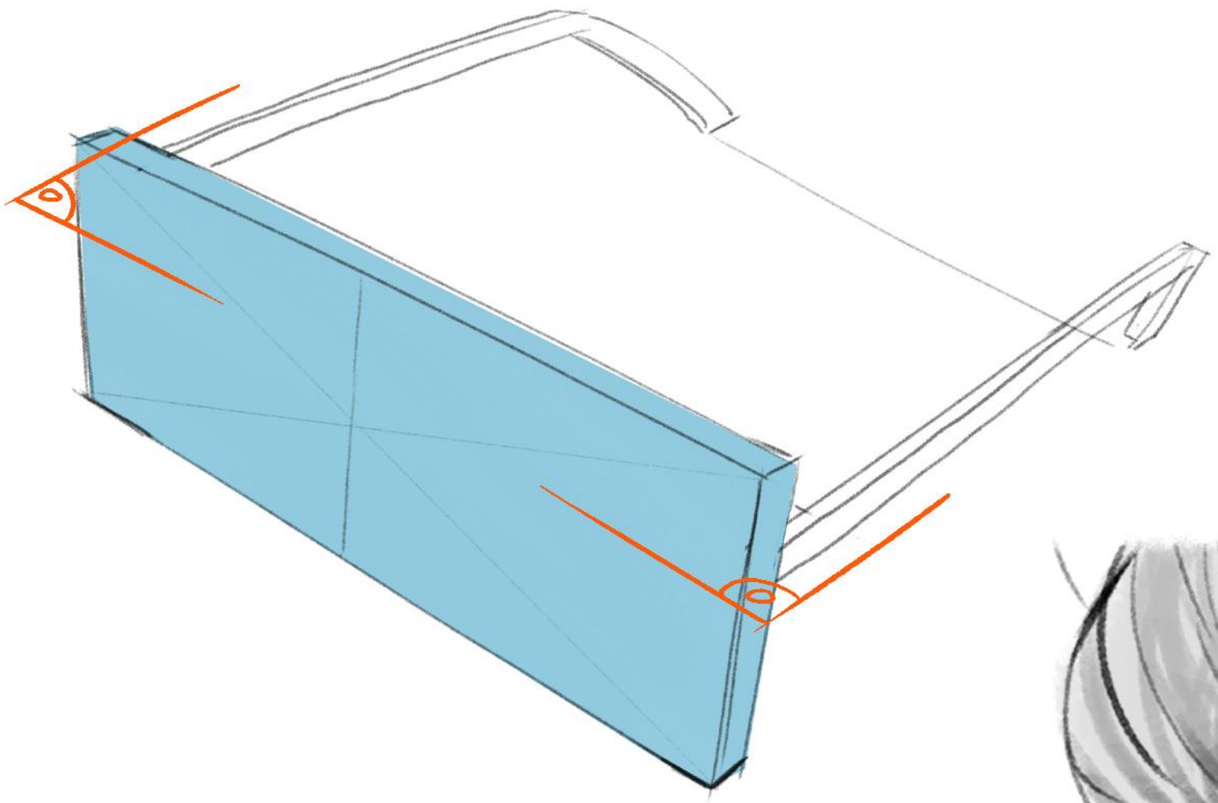

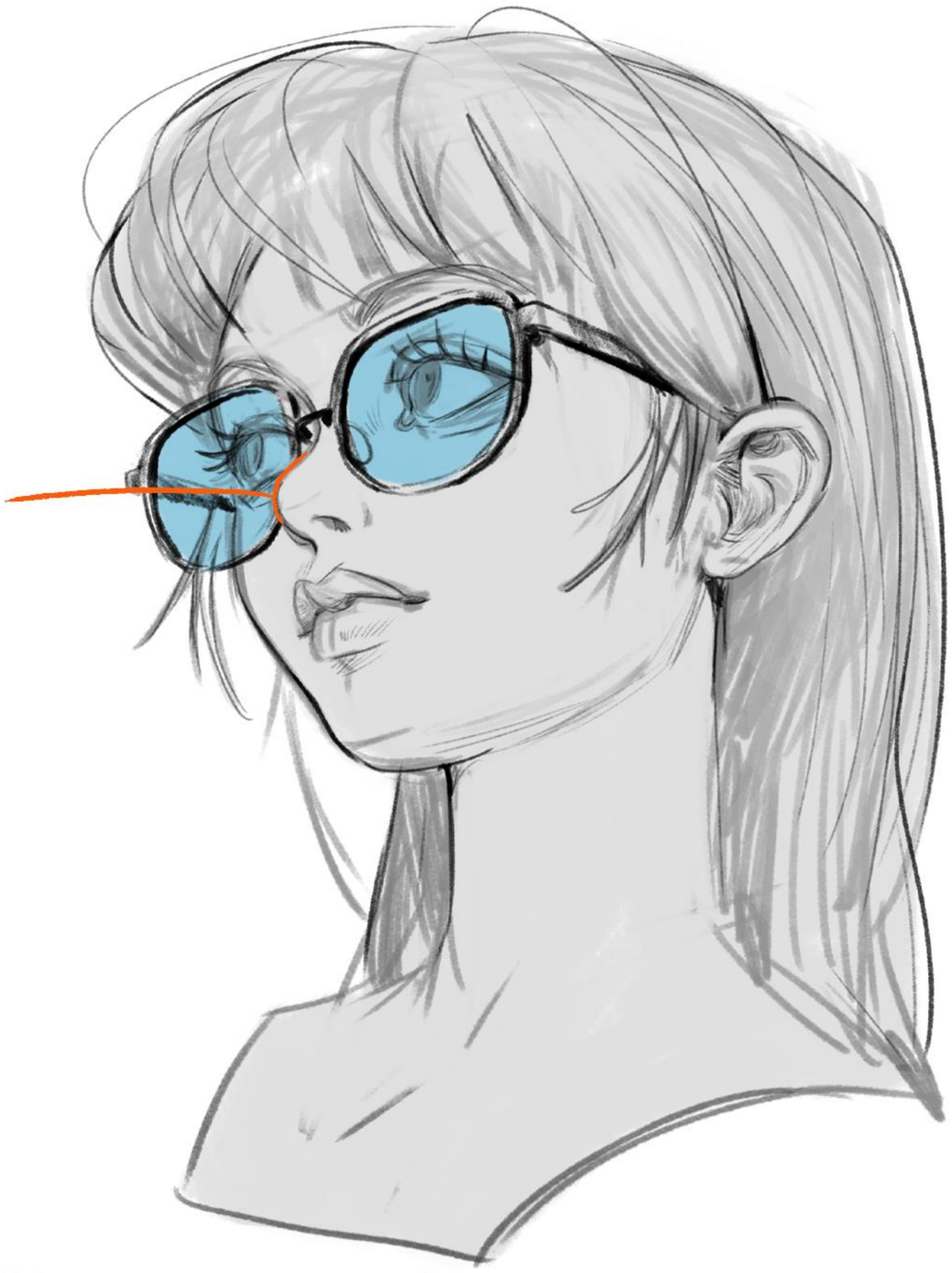

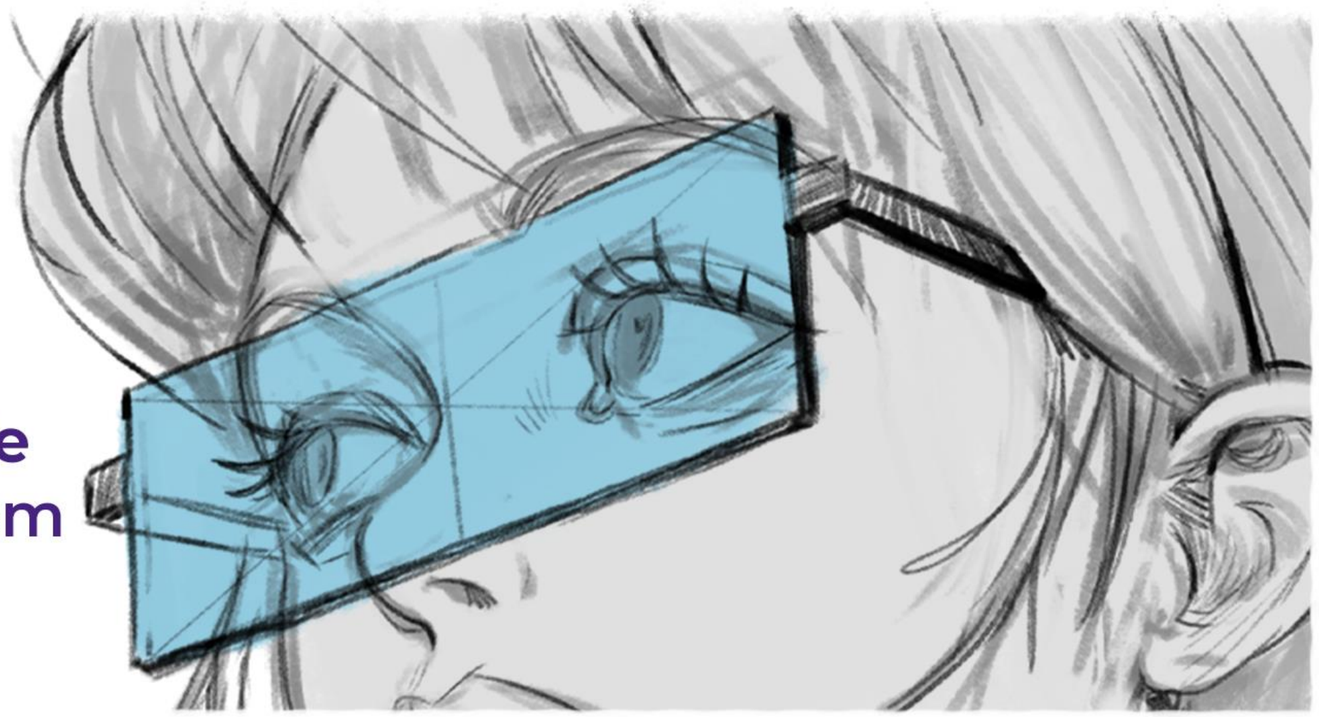

Simplify glasses into a **flat rectangle** to have an easier time skething them in **perspective.**

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Sketching Glasses (3/3)

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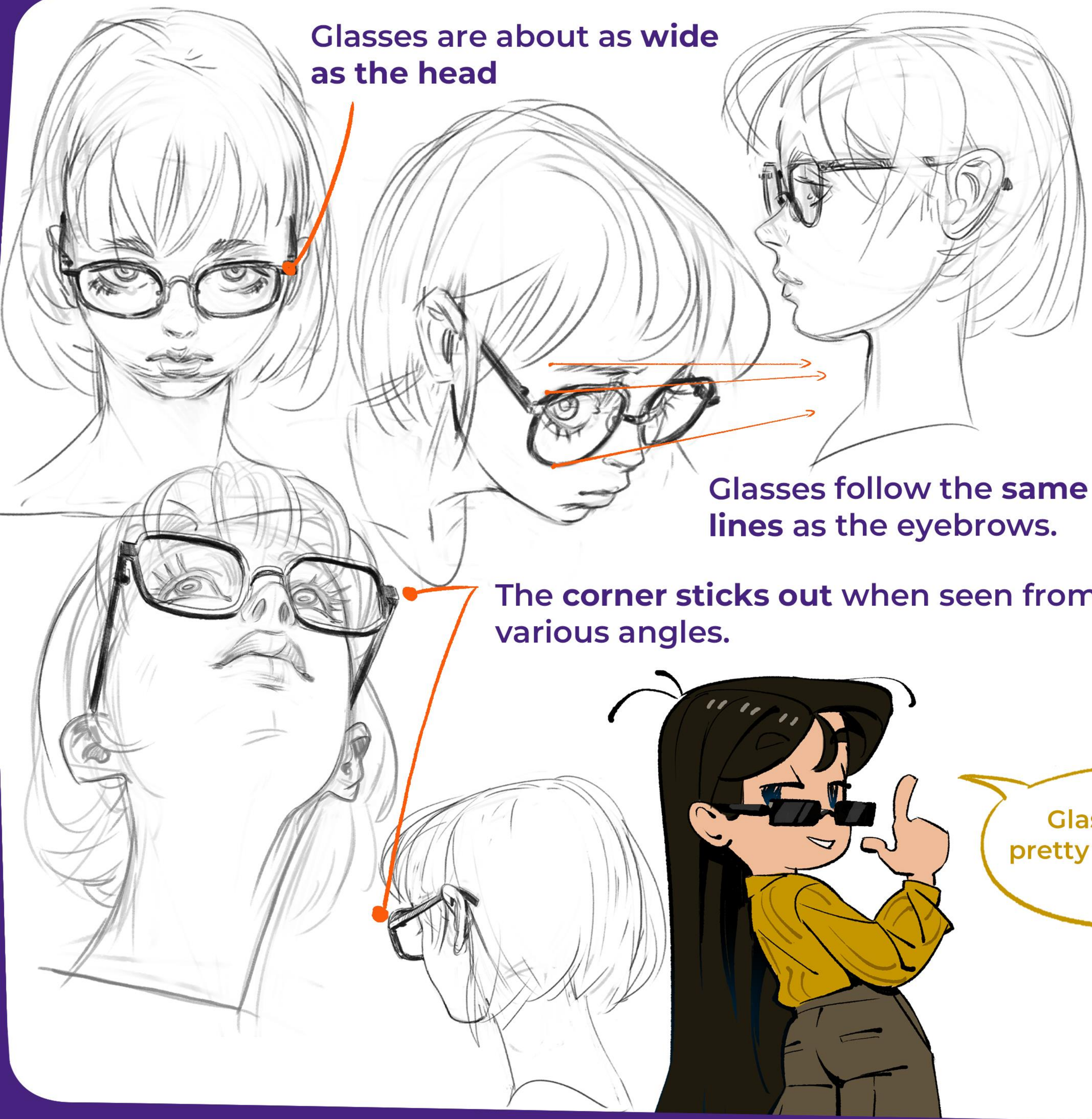

Glasses are about as wide as the head

Glasses follow the **same vanishing lines** as the eyebrows.

The **corner sticks out** when seen from various angles.

Glasses are pretty **cool**, huh?

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Sketching Books (1/4)

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Sketching Books

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Sketching Books (2/4)

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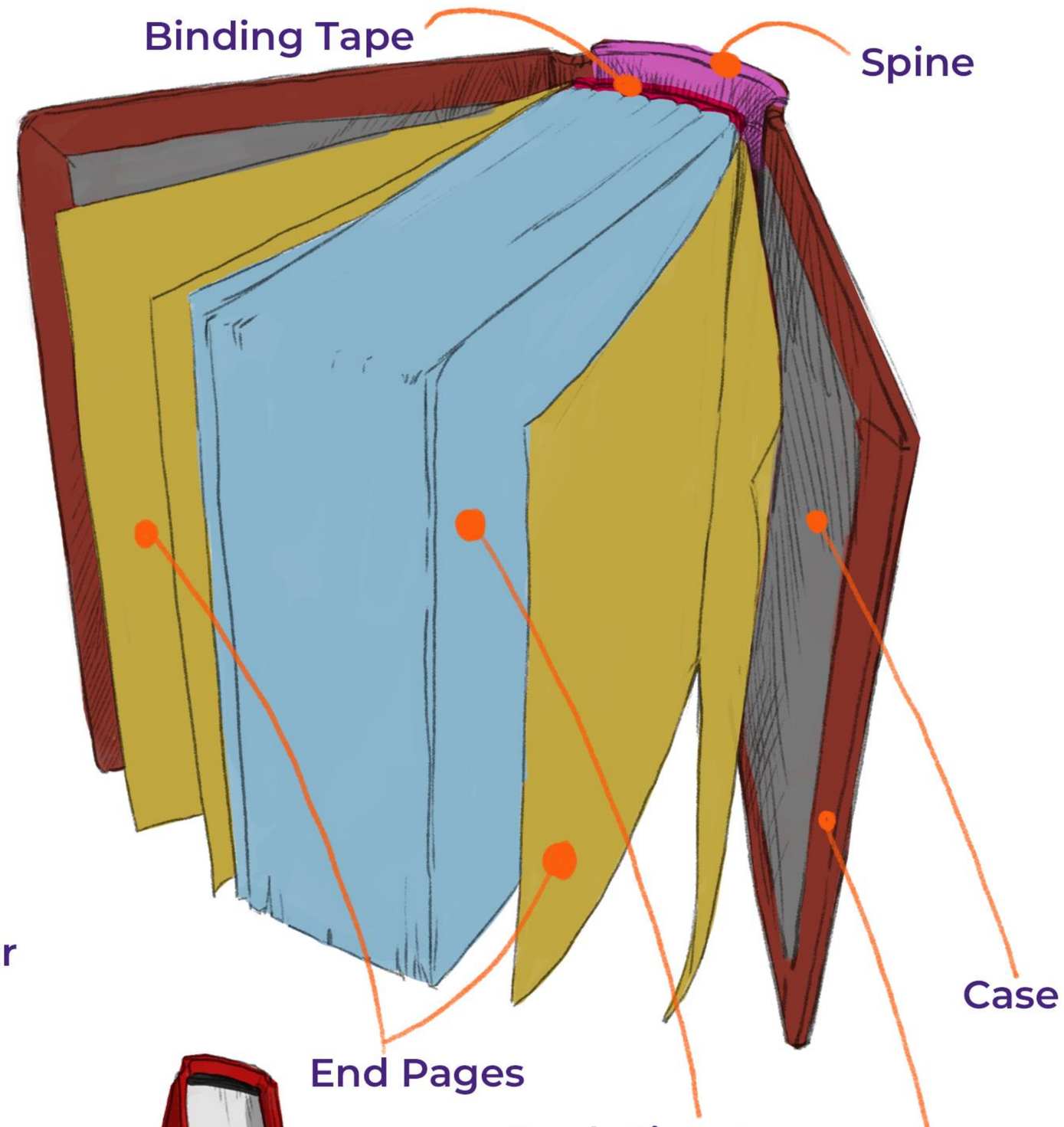
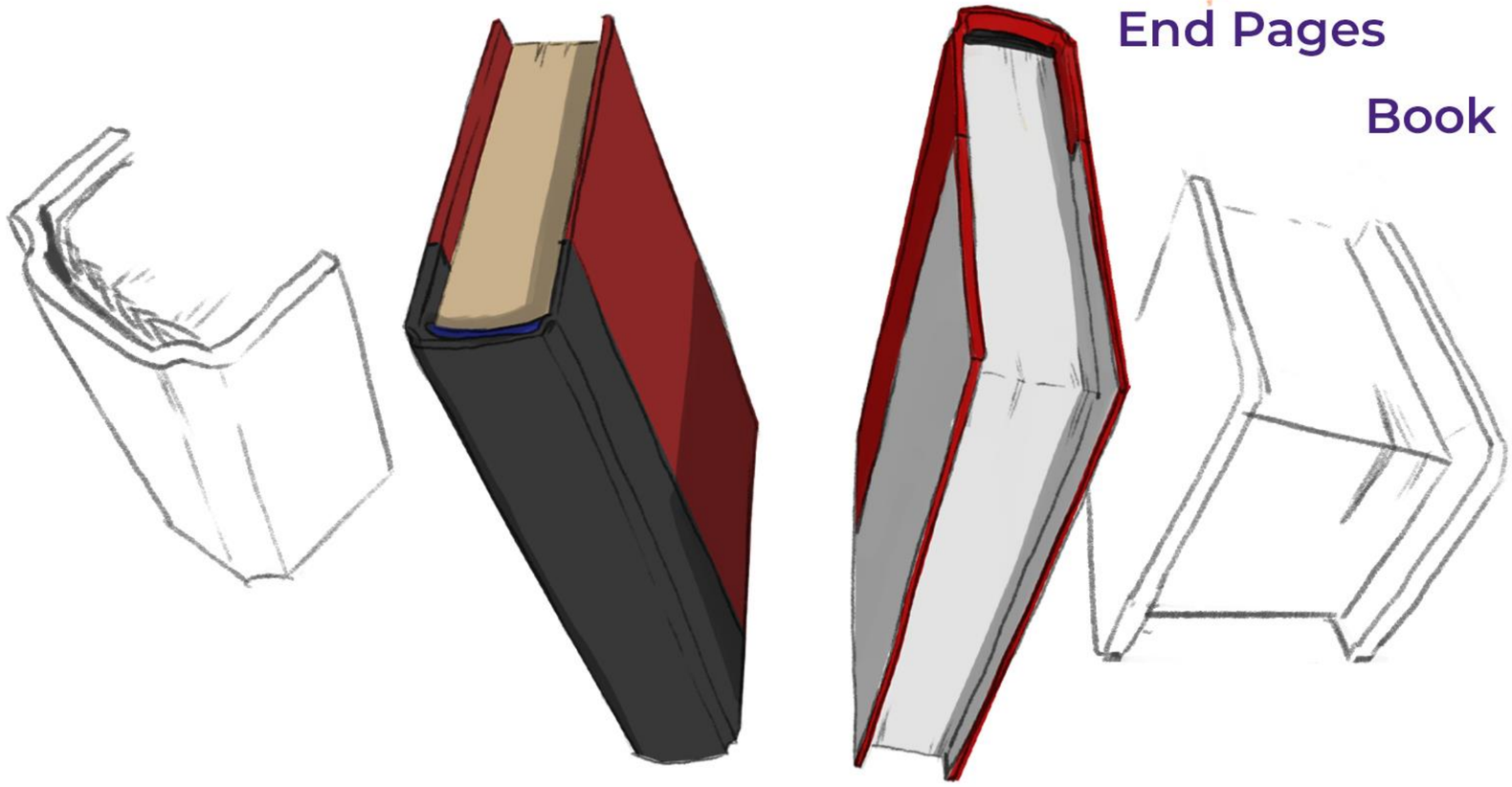
Most books are made up of simple and recognizable components.



Ornamental Covers are common in older books.



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Sketching Books (3/4)

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Closed books resemble a flat box and can be easily arranged, stacked, and placed in a scene.

The pages of open books create an interesting shape.

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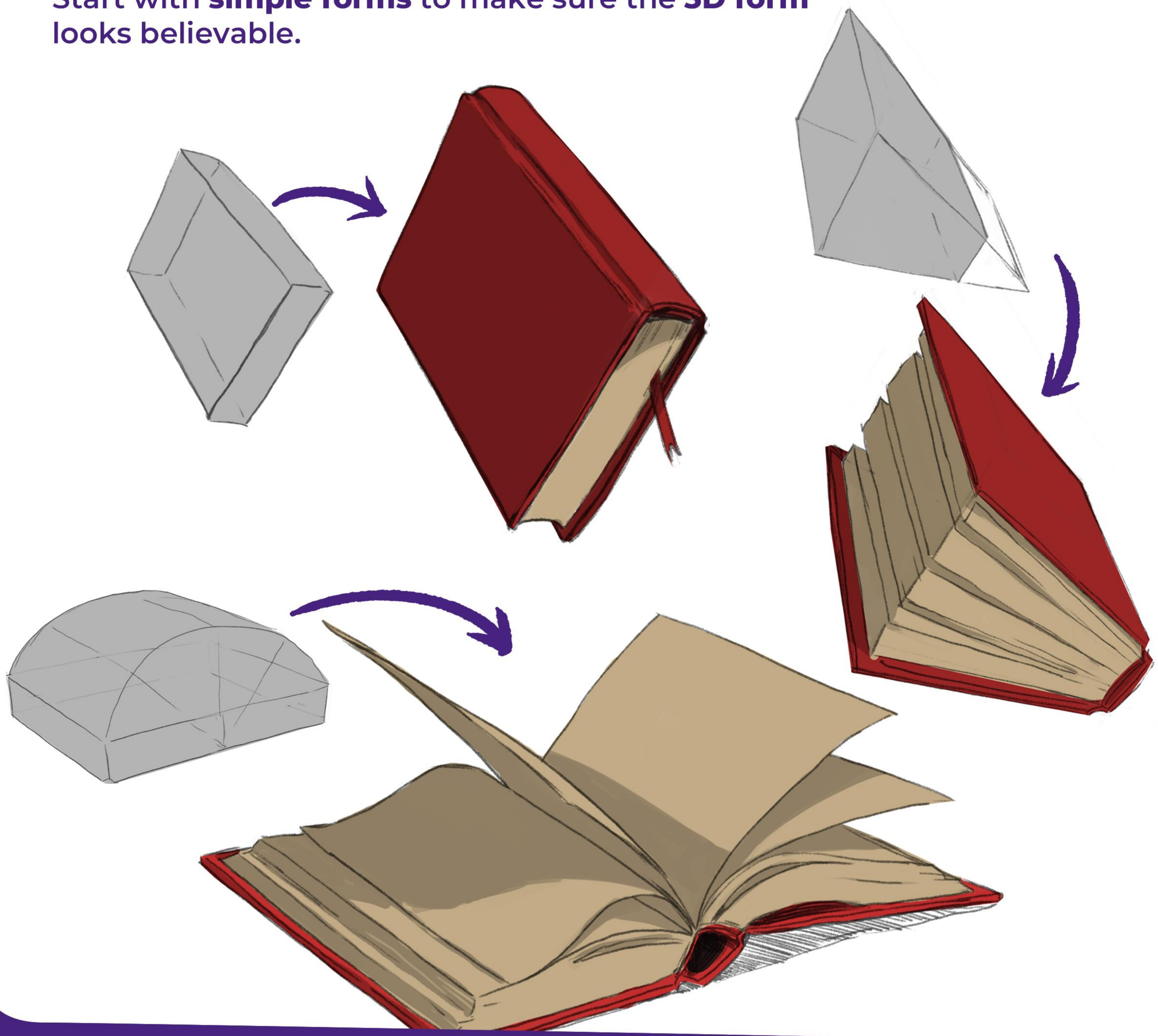
Sketching Books (4/4)

Start with **simple forms** to make sure the **3D form** looks believable.



Want to learn more?

Perspective is the science that all artists need, regardless what they want to create.

Click Me!

to go to the course

Sketching Herons

Confidently drawing **herons** requires sketching the bird from reference multiple times. Draw herons from different angles, in different poses, and in a simplified manner using primitive forms. This helps transfer the image of the bird into our **visual library**.

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Sketching Herons (3/5)

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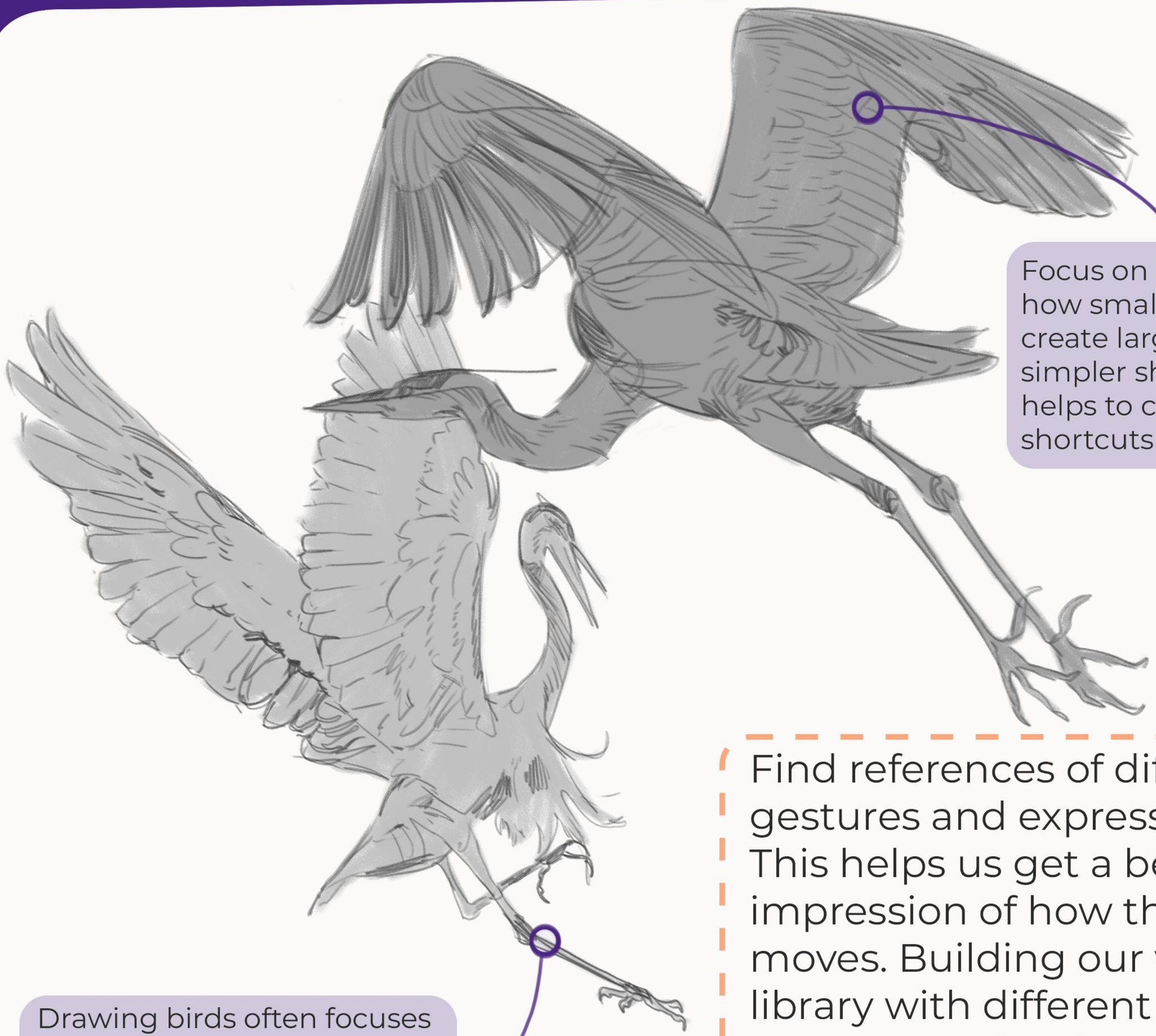
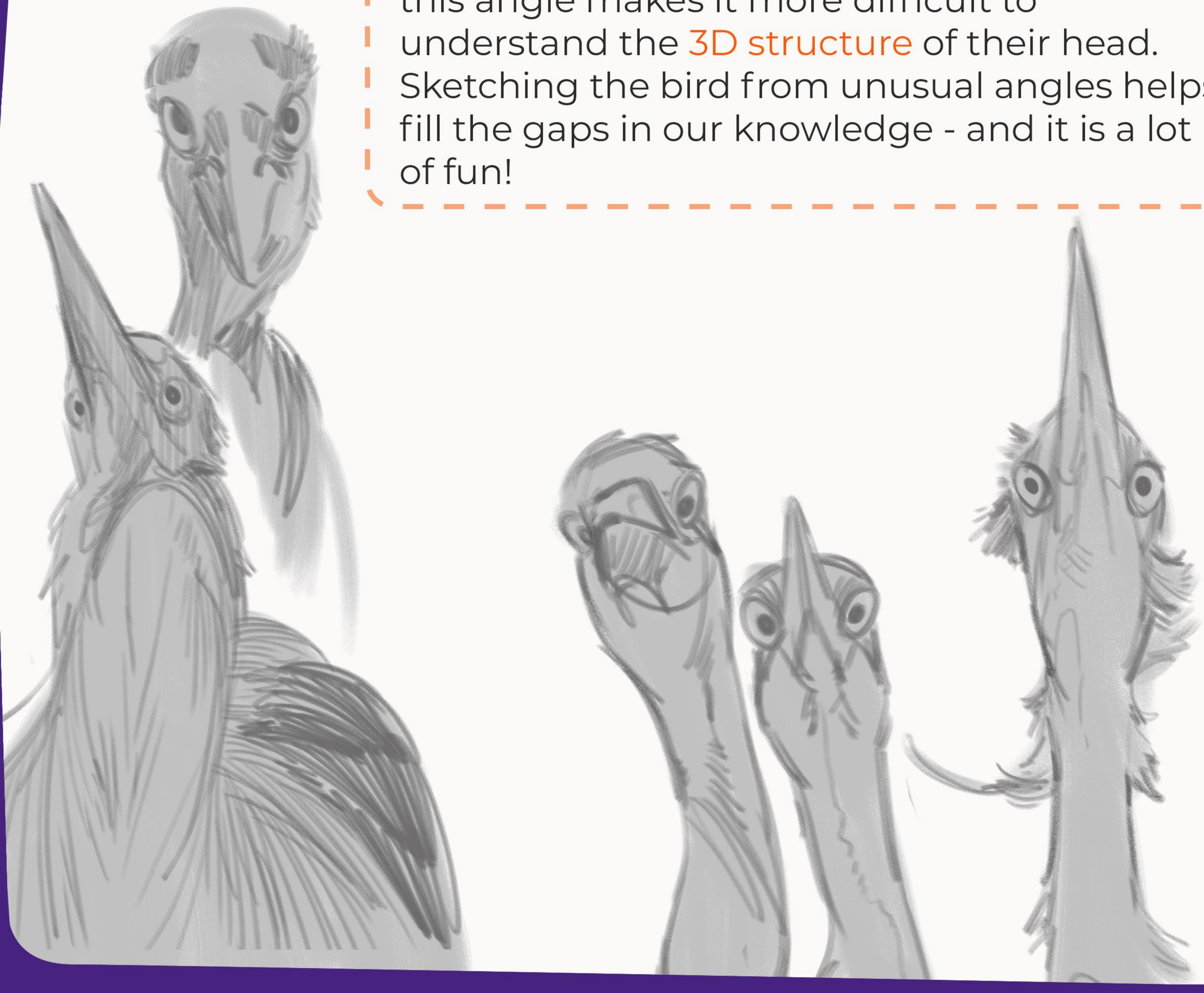


Focus on identifying how small elements create larger and simpler shapes. This helps to create drawing shortcuts later.

Drawing birds often focuses on the expressiveness of the wings, but the whole body offers unexpected visual gems.

Find references of different gestures and expressions. This helps us get a better impression of how the bird moves. Building our visual library with different gestures makes it easier to create authentic depictions in our own drawings and paintings.

A lot of photographs of herons feature their distinct side profile. Drawing them only from this angle makes it more difficult to understand the 3D structure of their head. Sketching the bird from unusual angles helps fill the gaps in our knowledge - and it is a lot of fun!



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Sketching Herons (5/5)

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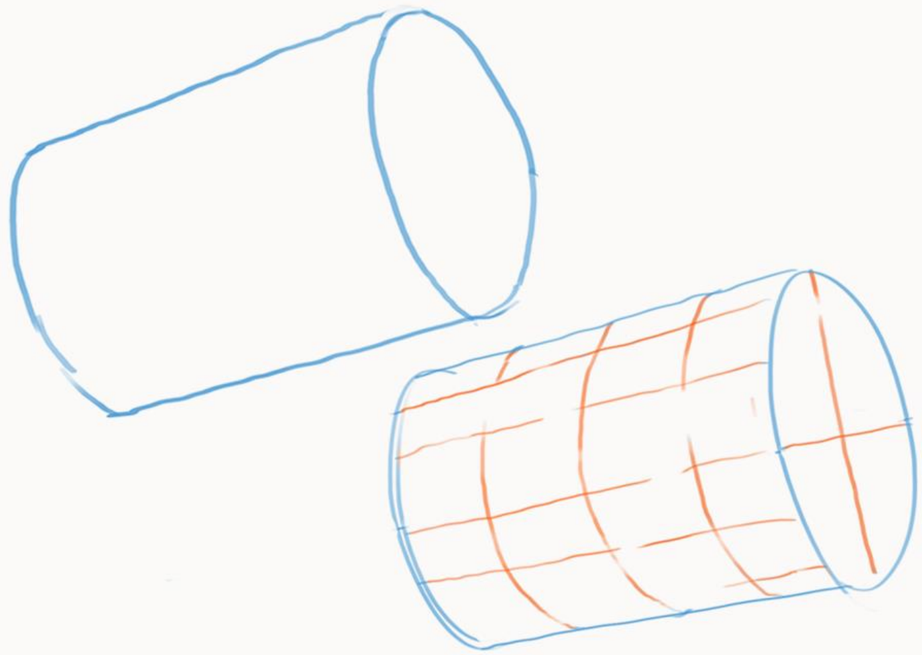
Sketch the bird in a simplified manner using **primitive forms** (boxes, cylinders, etc) to develop a mental 3D image of the heron.
Drawing through the form and using wireframes also visualizes the 3D structure of the bird in a clear manner.



Love to sketch birds? See more tips in this free PDF

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Strong Compositions (1/4)

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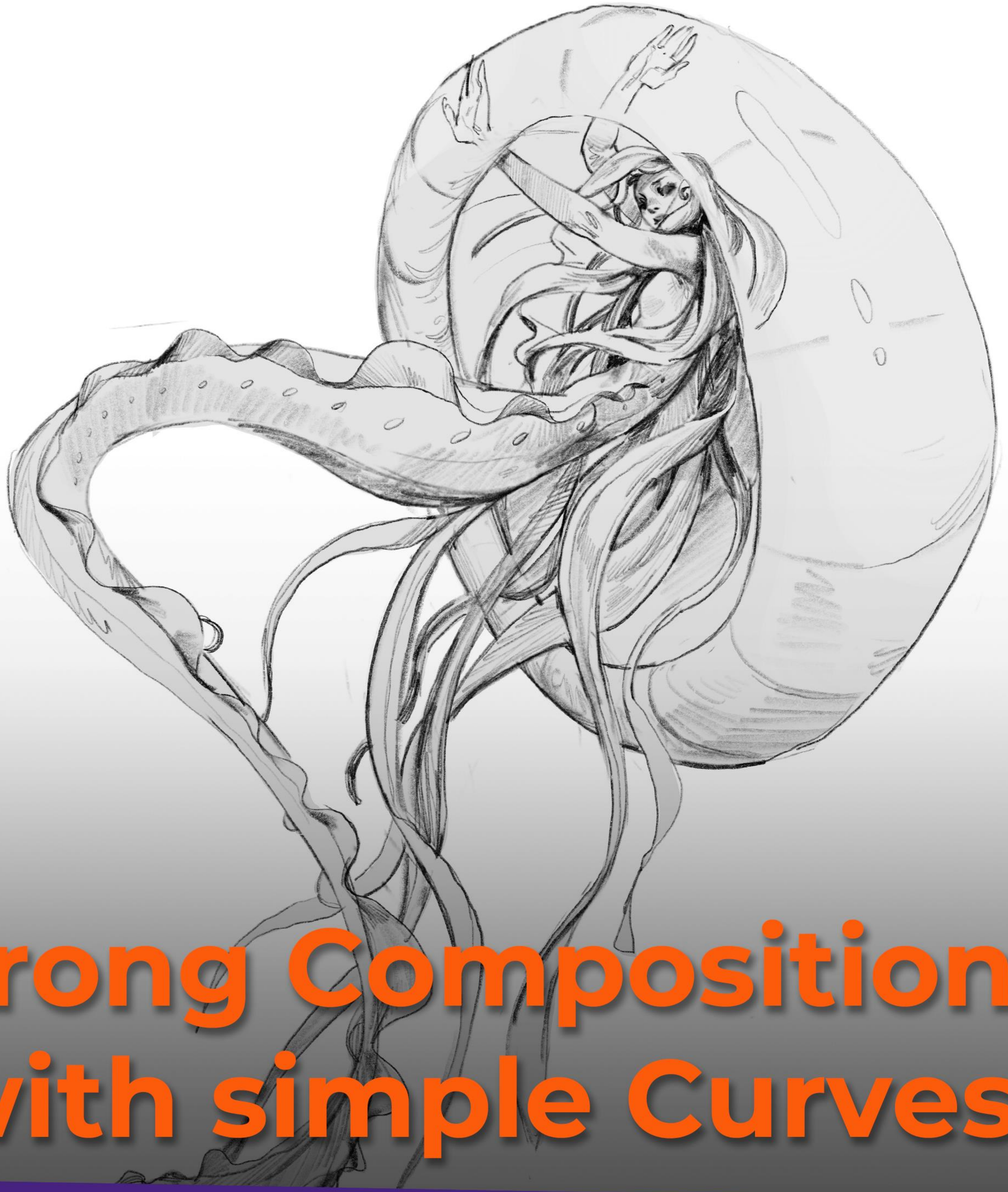

Strong Compositions with simple Curves

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Strong Compositions (2/4)

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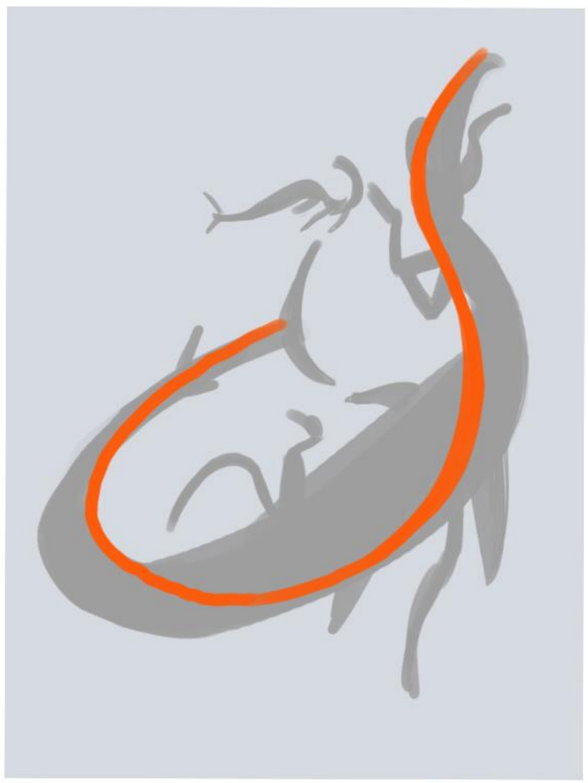
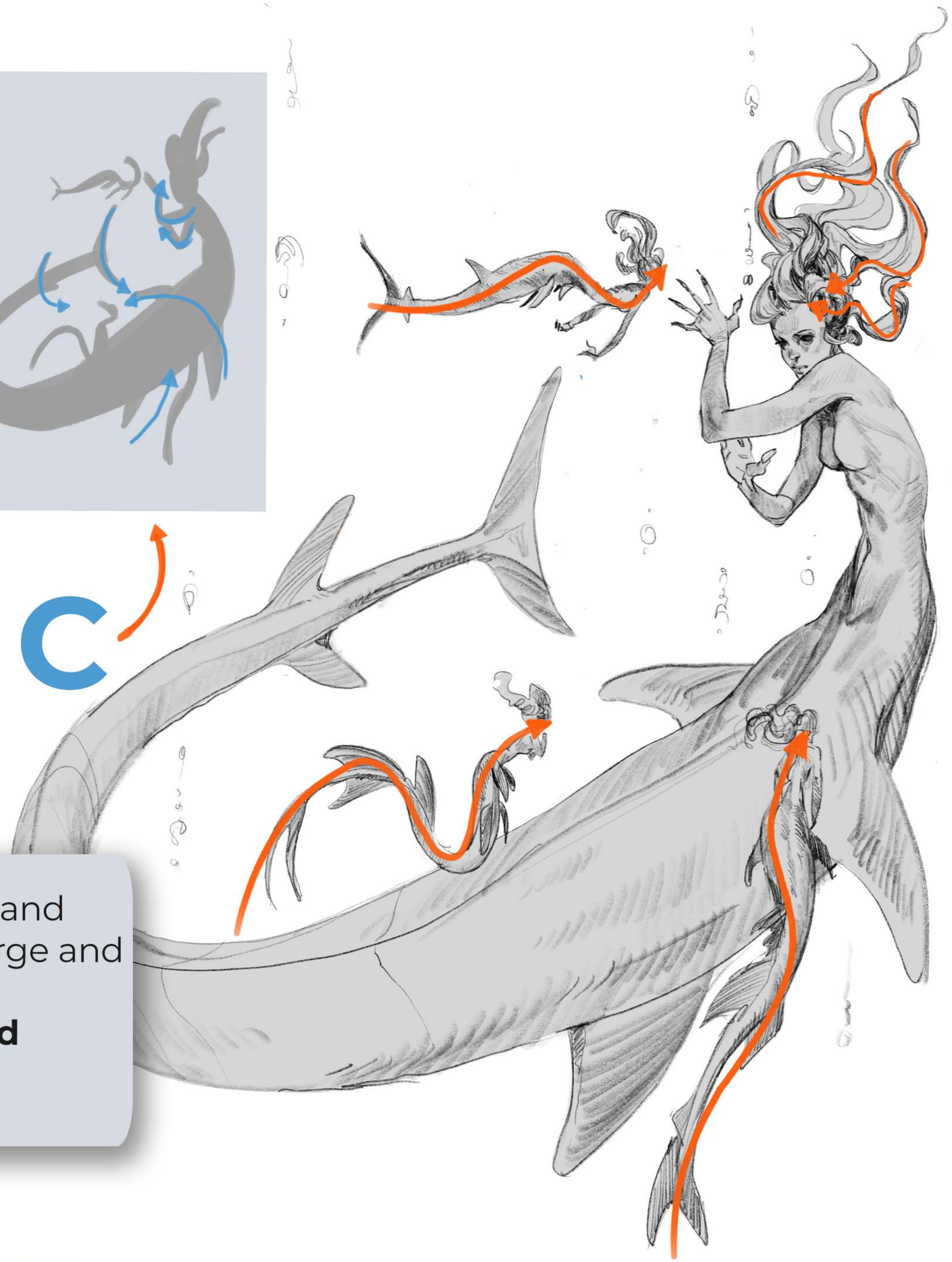


S

C



To add **motion** to scenes and characters, we can use large and small **C** and **S** curves.
They serve as **gesture and rhythm** lines.

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Strong Compositions (3/4)

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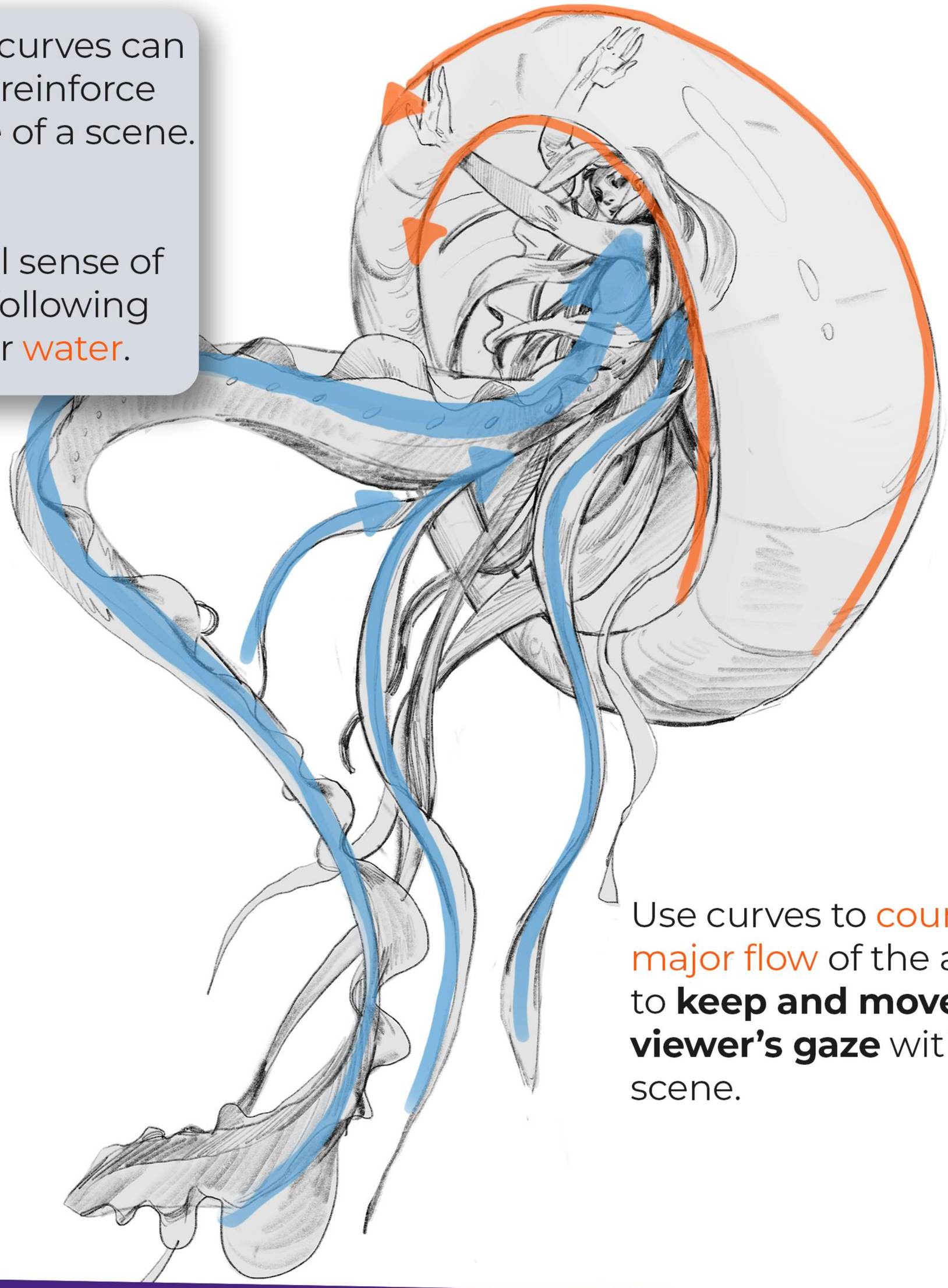
Smaller lines and curves can help support and reinforce the major gesture of a scene.

To create a natural sense of motion, imagine following the flow of wind or water.



Use curves to counter the major flow of the artwork to **keep and move the viewer's gaze** within the scene.

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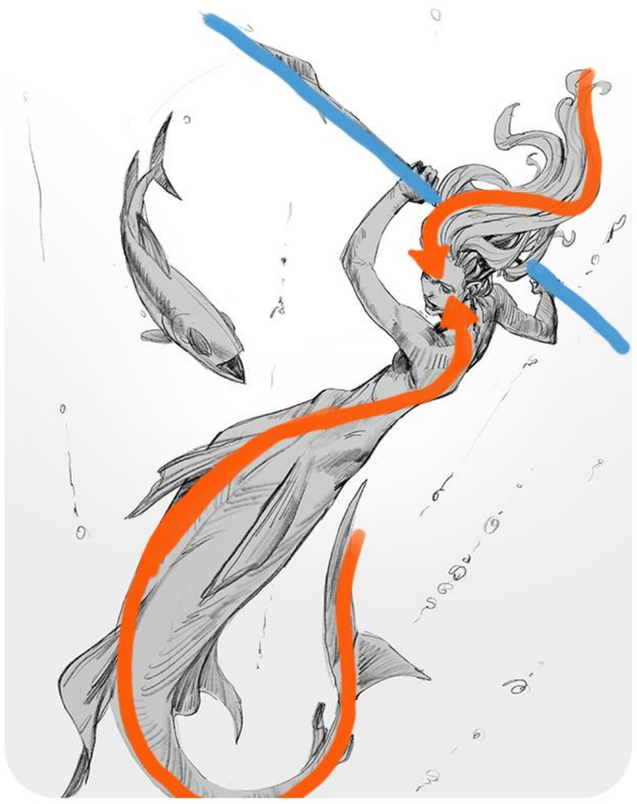
Strong Compositions (4/4)

Visual interest can be created by contrasting **curves** with straight **lines**.

We can also let **gesture lines** flow through, or point towards areas of interest.



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Triangle Compositions

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Triangle Compositions (2/4)

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Positioning multiple characters so their focus points form a **triangle** helps keep the viewer's gaze within the artwork, preventing it from drifting away.

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Triangle Compositions (3/4)

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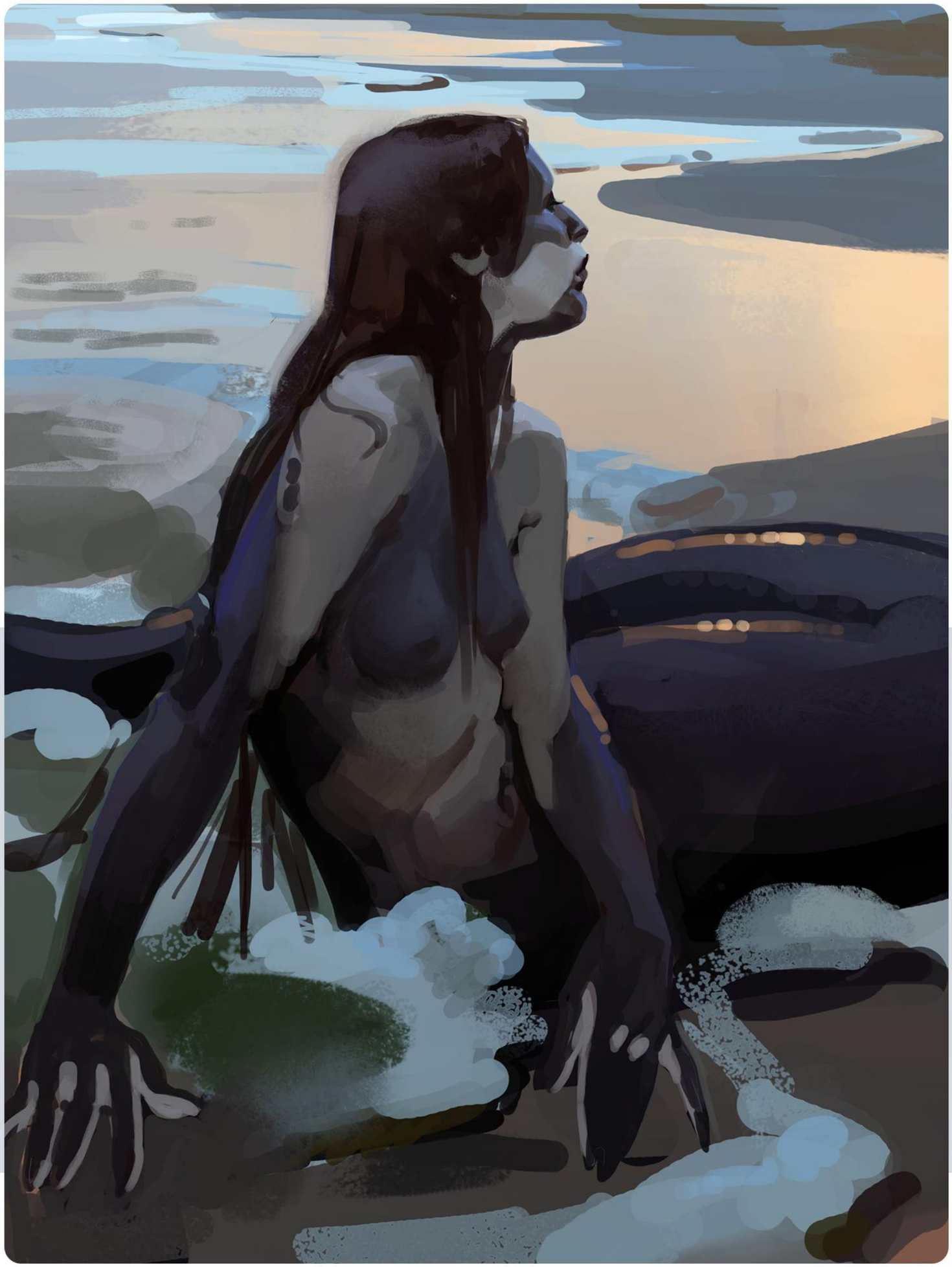
Head and hands are important to understand a character's state of mind.

They can also serve as areas of interest in a character-focused scene.

The triangle composition can be easily applied here.



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Triangle Compositions (4/4)

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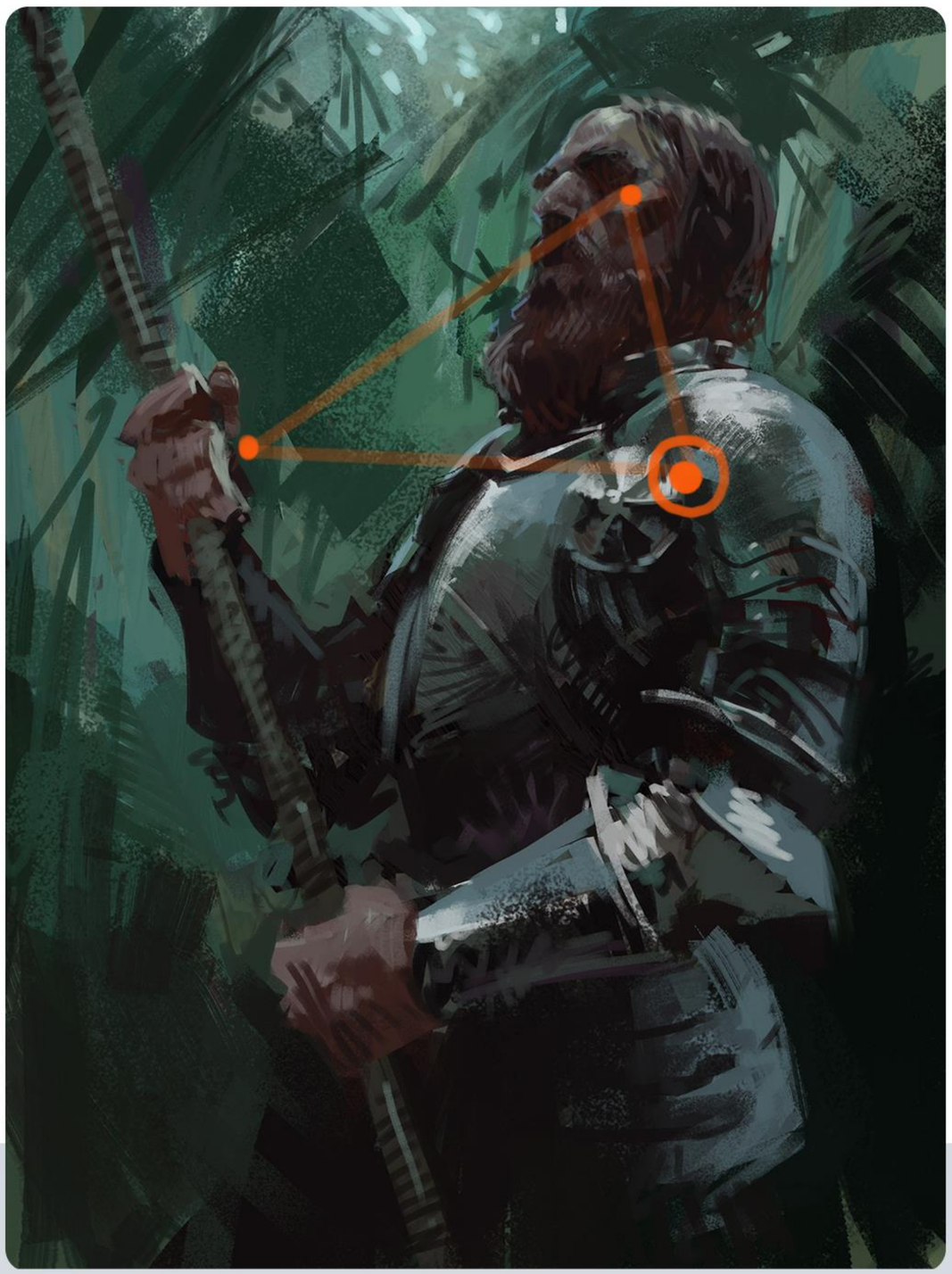

A triangle arrangement can guide the viewer's gaze not only to faces and hands, but also to story elements, such as tools or weapons.

Visually striking features can serve as areas of interest and can function as corners in the triangle.

Higher refinement or complexity help to distinguish these points from the rest of the artwork.

Want to create stronger compositions? Check out this video

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Round Brush and Shapes

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Round Brush and Shapes (2/4)

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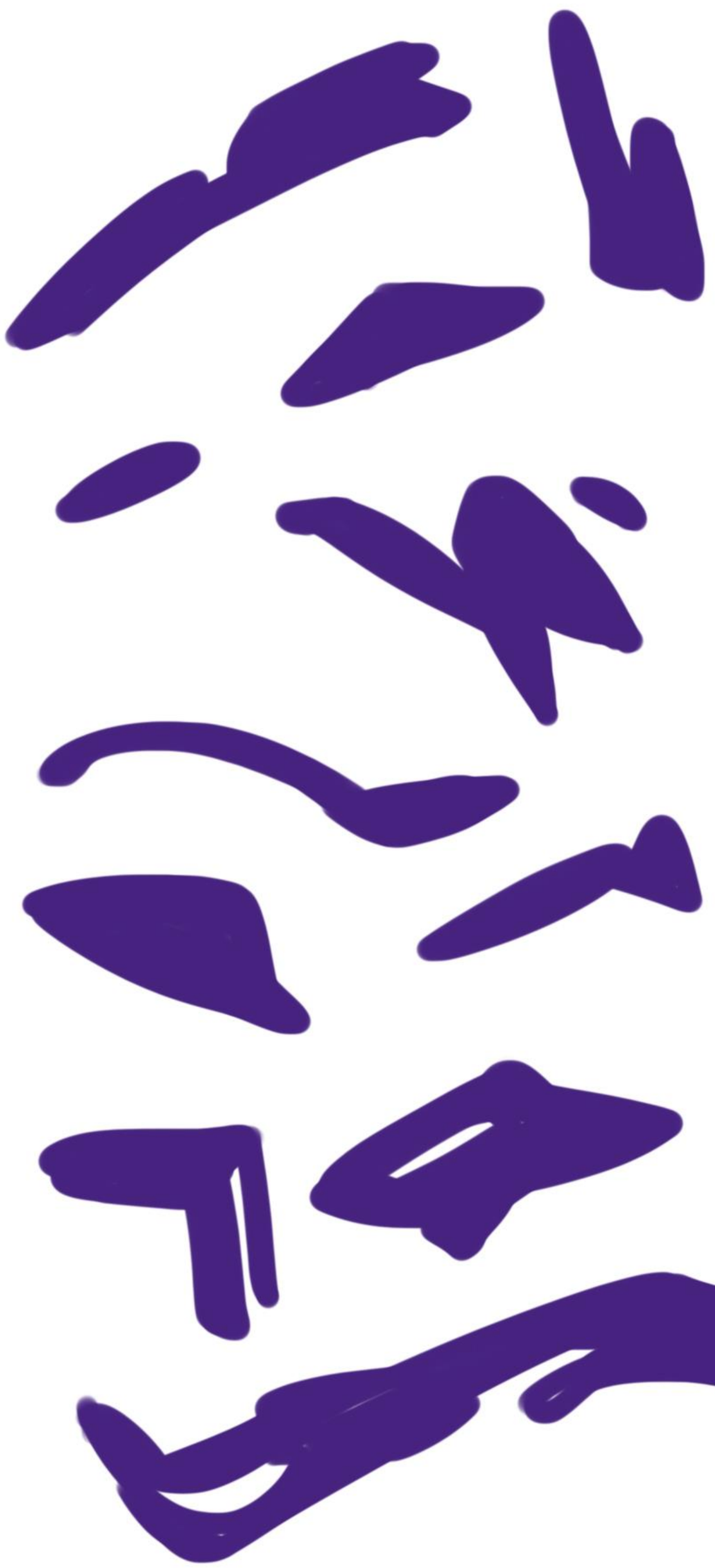
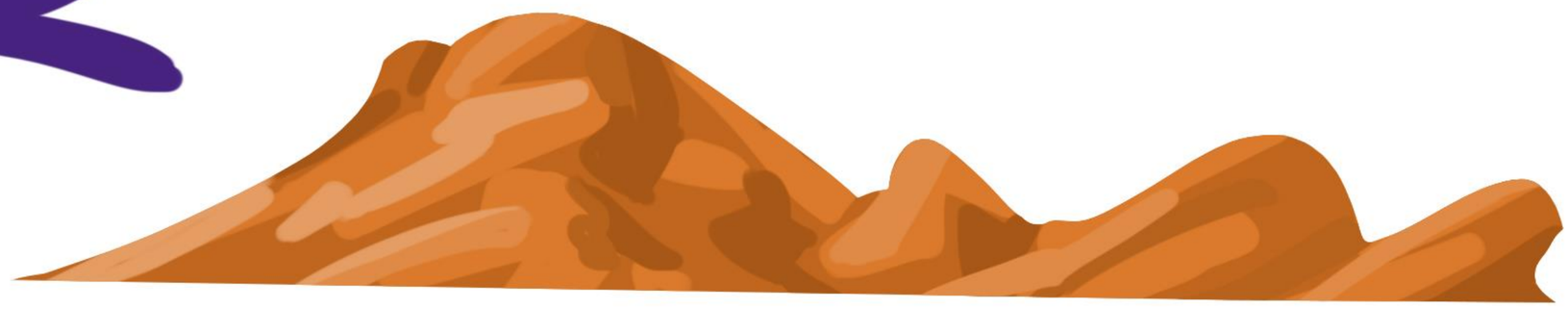
Just use a normal round brush, and just practice a bit of shapes.



The Practice has to be simple and deliberate.

Then Combine the shapes with selection and even use a bit of opacity to the brush. Practice with a single value, nothing complicated.



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Round Brush and Shapes (3/4)

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Now move the practice from the simple single-value practice of shapes, to doing a full range of various shapes using both color and value. We don't need to create an amazing crazy piece yet, this is for the purpose of practice. Use reference if you need it, as in this example.

Try to choose colors and avoid color picking for the practice itself.

Brett Allen Johnson

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Round Brush and Shapes (4/4)

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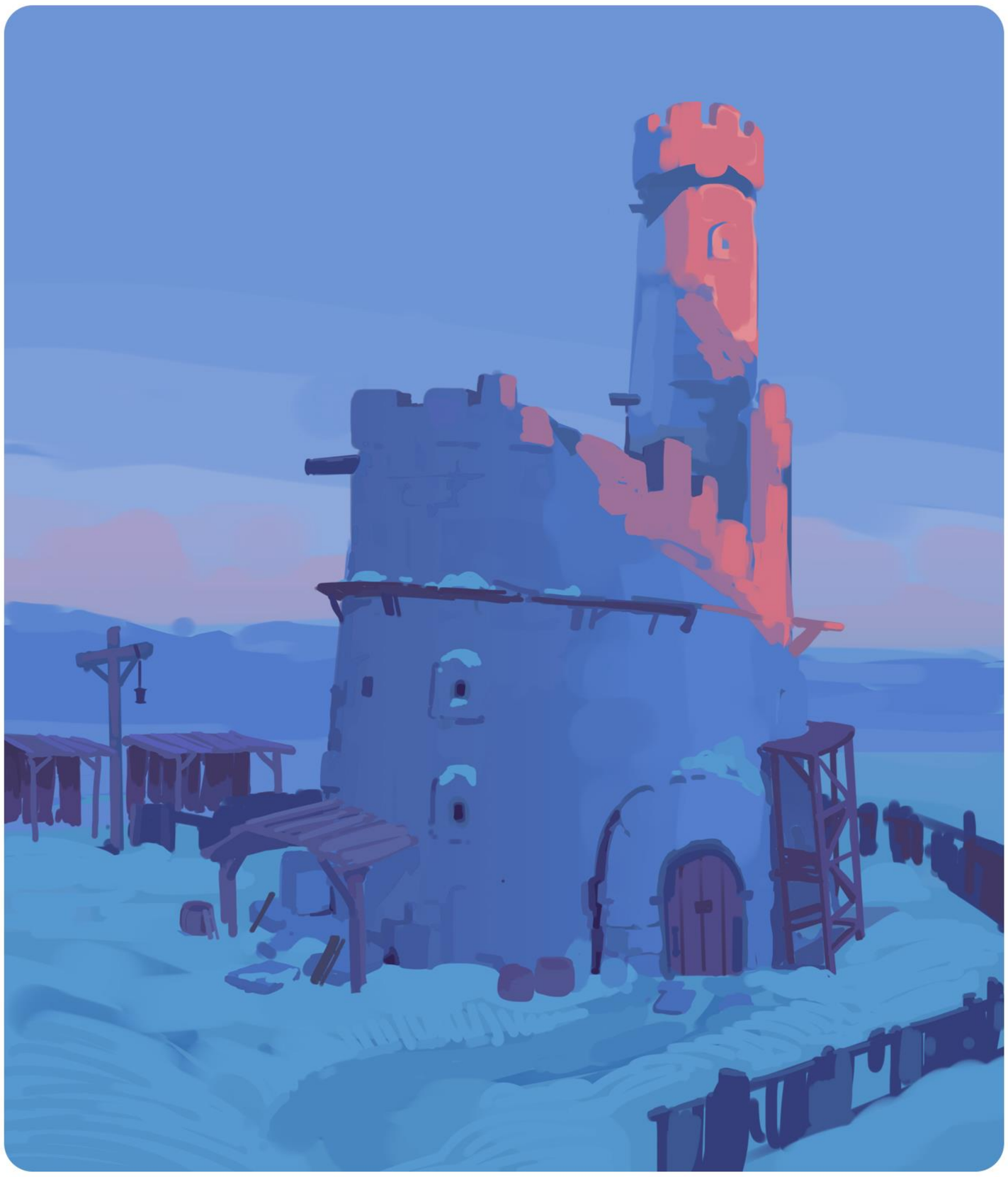
Then give it a try from imagination - so you can instil some of the things you learn into your own artworks. The process is simple:

1. Practice some shapes and some value blocks with shapes
2. Practice with color after a reference
3. Practice everything you did from imagination to see what you learned!

Cold Tower

Tips on Brush Economy and Selection



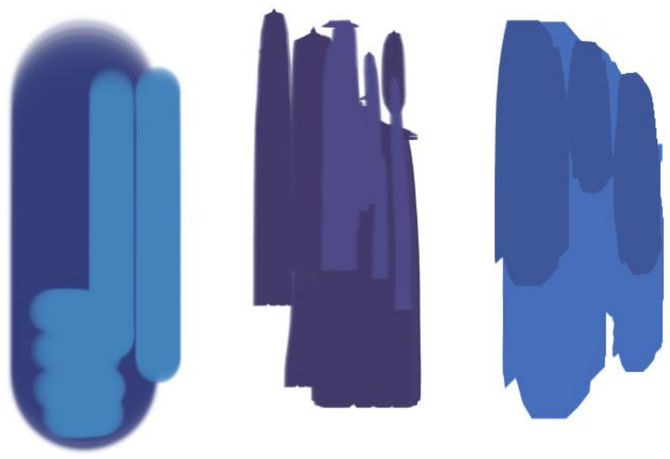
Brush Economy

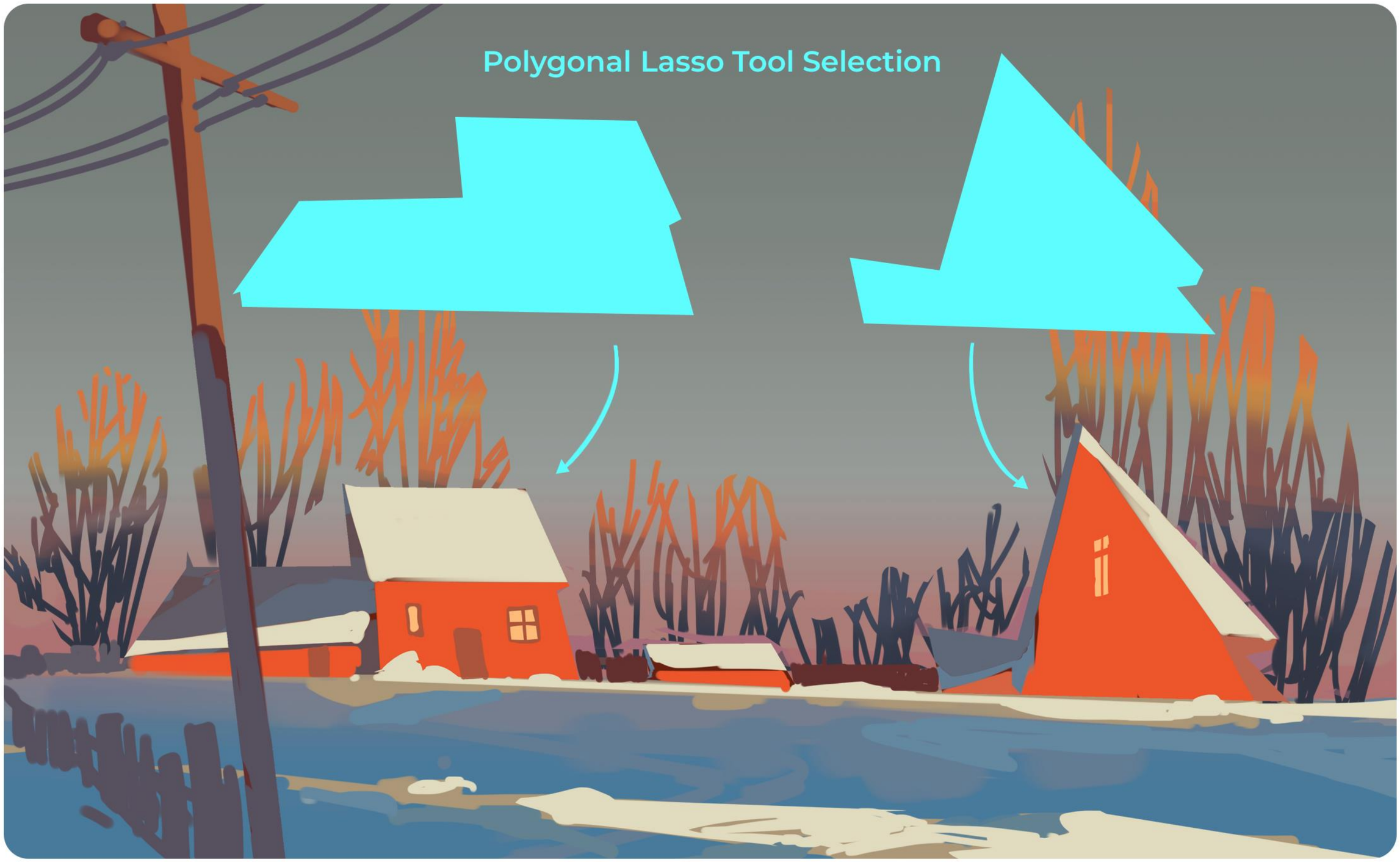
With Brush Ecnomy, we refer to how many brush strokes are required to build an image.

In the present example, we can check and see how simple, yet how effective the brush work is.

Types of Brushes to practice

The best way to practice is to use full opacity brushes. This will force you to make some really clear decisions across the board - from values, color, shapes etc.





Working with Selection

Selection works best to build shape definition - meaning: if you have a sketch, you can use selection such as Lasso Tool or Polygonal Lasso.

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Cold Tower (4/4)

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The brush used here is a simple round brush - combined in some areas with selection. Another great tip, as you notice, goes into color range and the use of complementary colors.

If you study, or want to work with better painting, this subscribes to the idea that “less is more”, and a lot of times this means having simplicity.

Have fun in the process!

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The Forest

Tips on Simplification

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The Forest (2/4)

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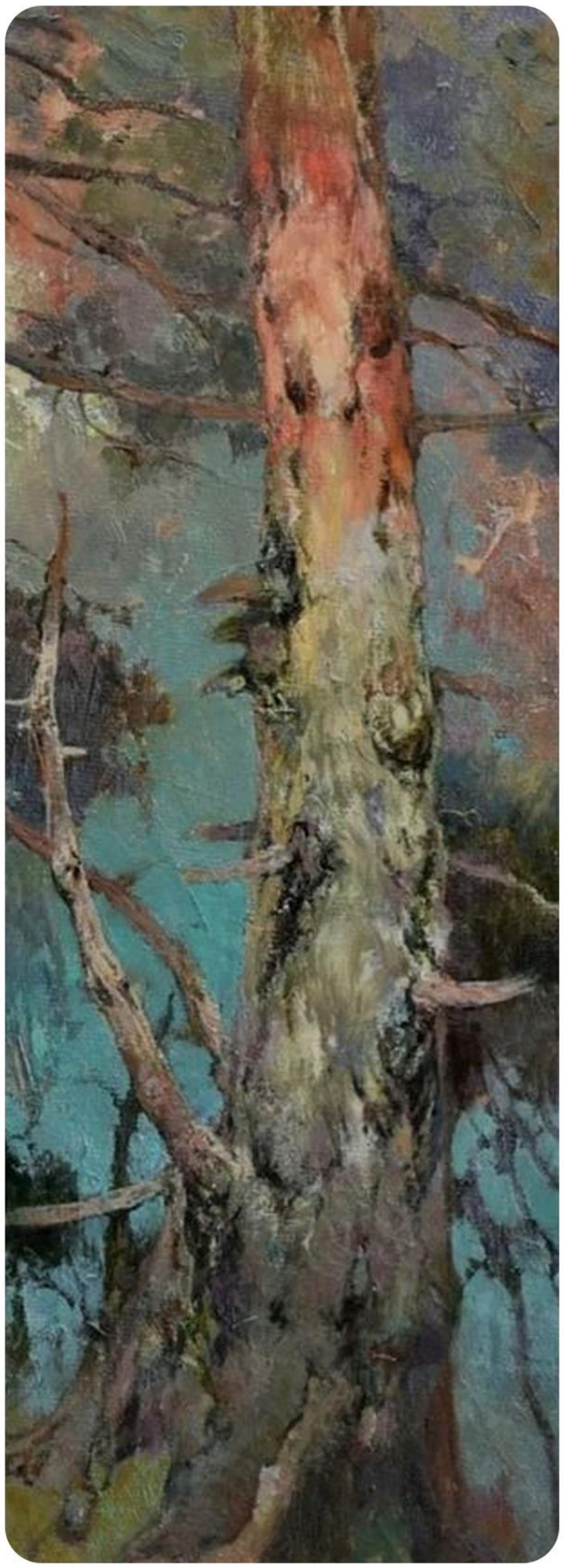
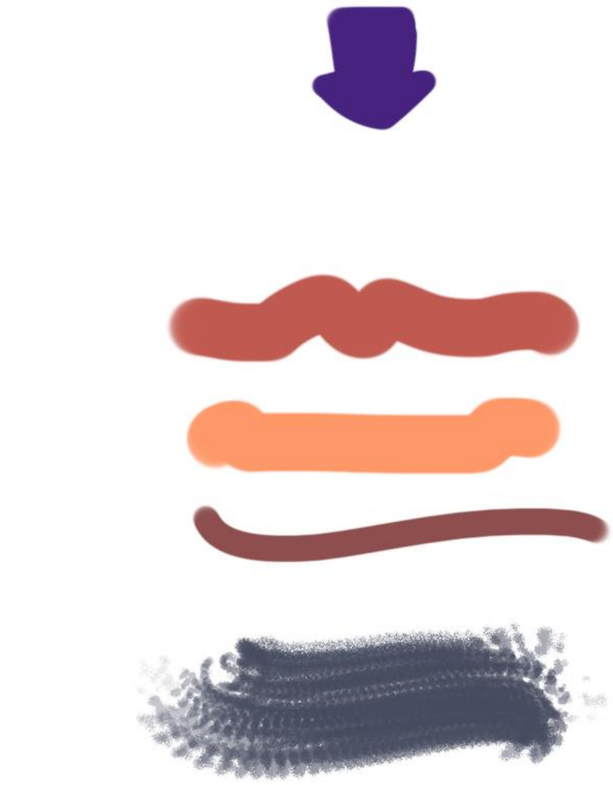


REF

Interpretation of the Ref

Brush and Shapes



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The Forest (3/4)

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Keep structures separate - The tree trunk is separate from the foliage. It’s good to have clarity - it helps later when it comes to color.

On the color side - we keep it simple - we have mostly warmer colors towards the top - colder towards the bottom.

Top area

Bottom area

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The Forest (4/4)

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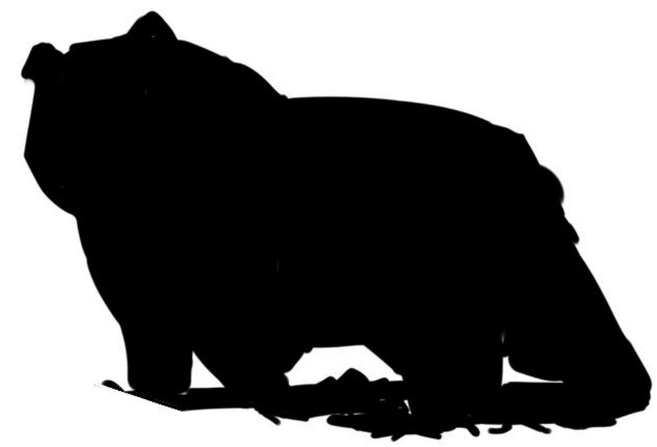
The Bear!

Always about Shape!



As you work, keep in mind that adding something like an animal (in this case) or a character in other cases - is essential to give us an idea of how big this environment is. It gives us a better and clearer sense of how this space feels and also on how it works.

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Lone Wolf (1/4)

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Lone Wolf

Tips on Painting loosely

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Lone Wolf (2/4)

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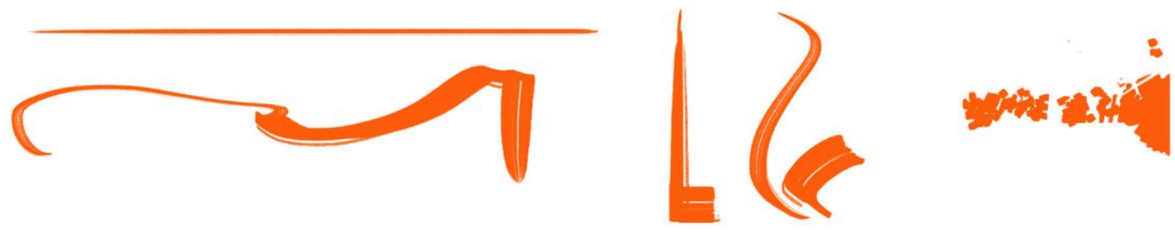
Main Gesture Lines

Secondary Gesture Lines

Brush and Gesture



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Lone Wolf (3/4)

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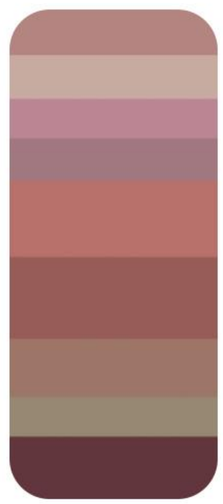
Hair

Make a choice of base colors.
We have a warm color palette, combining it with colder colors in shadows.

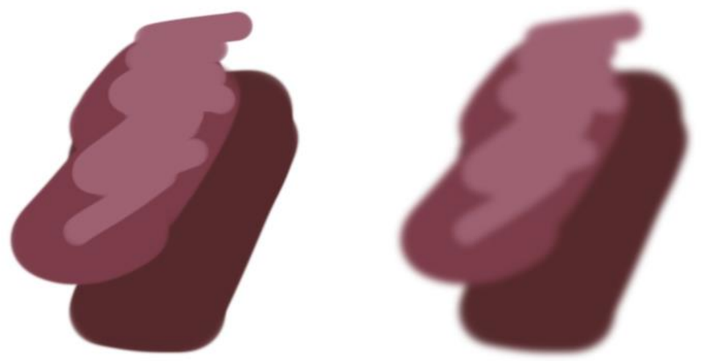
Skin



Clothing

Usage of Gradients

Brush Economy + Blur



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Lone Wolf (4/4)

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Use of Round Brush

Working with the simple round brush, with full opacity - keep painting and build a hierarchy of shadow and light.

Reinforcement of various areas through dark accents - occur deliberately, our focus is to keep it loose and readable.

Knowing how color works can definitely help to make certain decisions deliberate.

Stylized Form Painting

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Stylized Form Painting (2/4)

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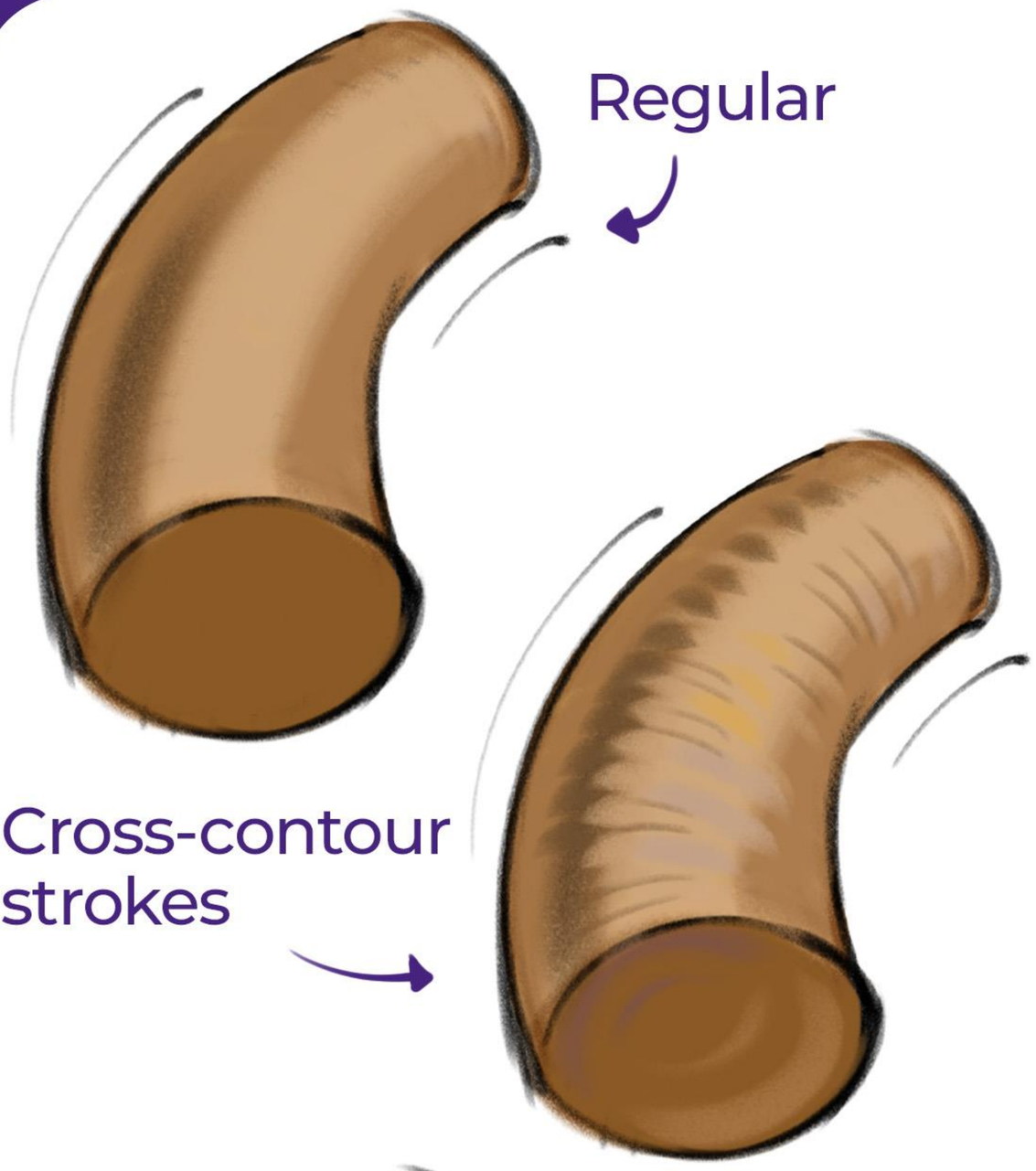

Similar to hatching in line art or inking, we can use our brushstrokes when painting to describe form. This can be achieved through hue variation and subtle value shifts.

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Stylized Form Painting (3/4)

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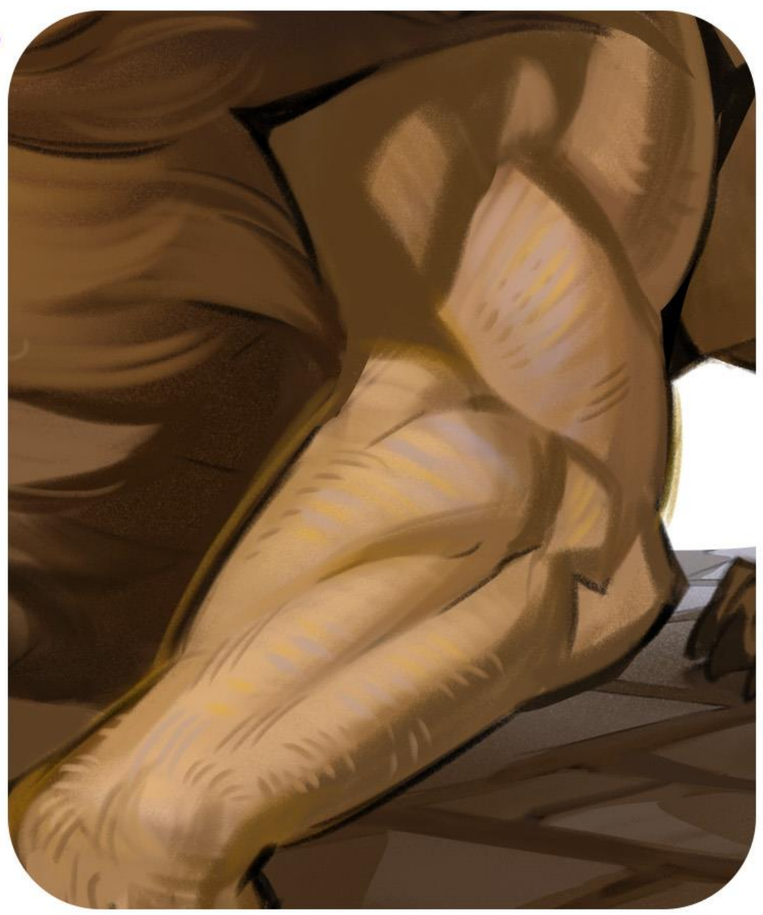
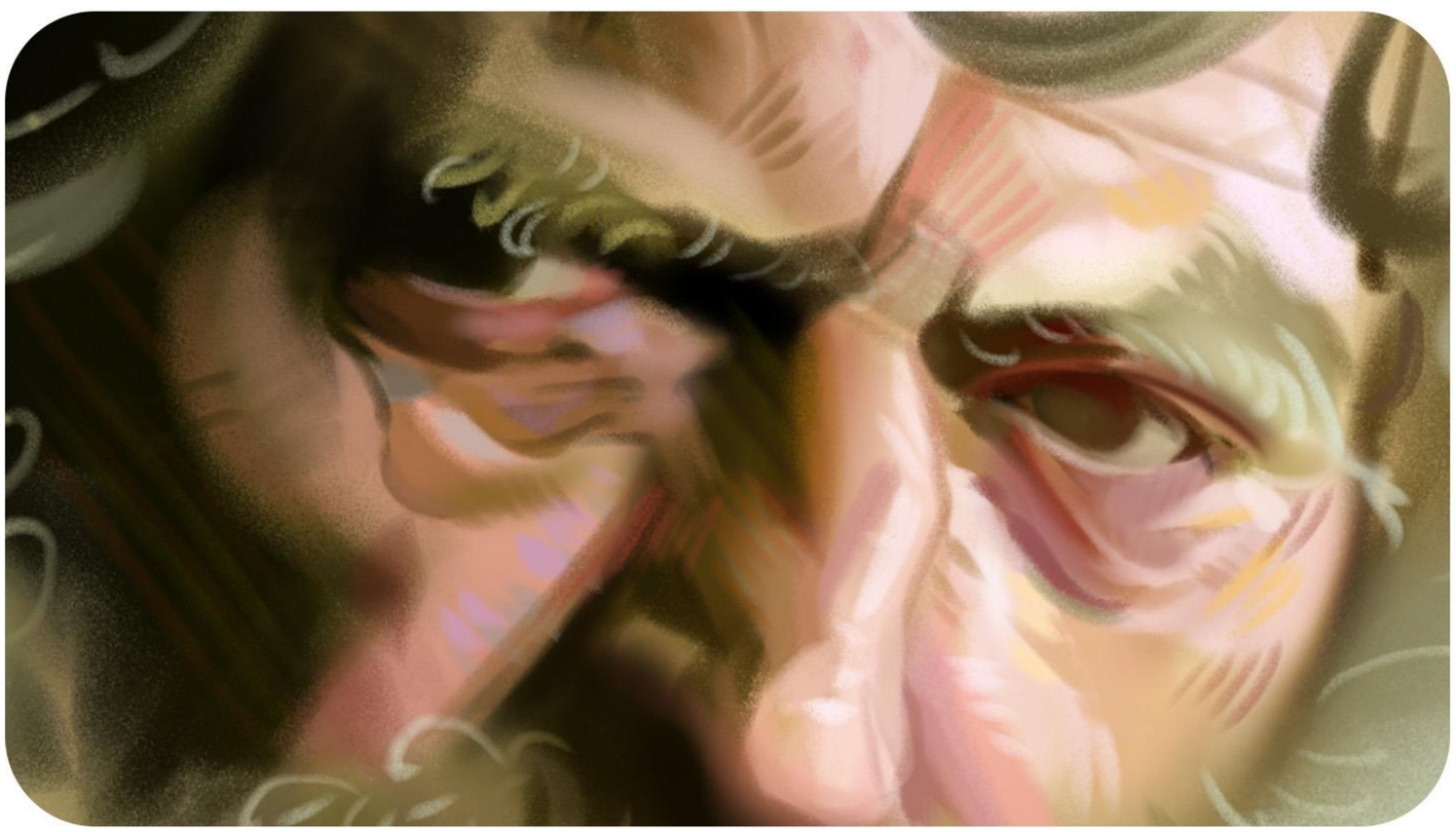
This style of painting can be **built up over time** during the rendering process or **added later** as a final touch.
It's best not to overdo the hatching technique, as too much can create unnecessary visual noise.

1

2

3





Instead of applying hatching across the entire painting, we can focus it on specific areas to add visual interest.

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Stylized Form Painting (4/4)

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This process can result in a final piece with added visual interest across its form.

Mix textures and painting

Tips on textures and painting

At the start, we build a couple of textures - from various brushes - then we use these textures on top of our painting.

Textures

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Mix Textures and Painting (3/4)

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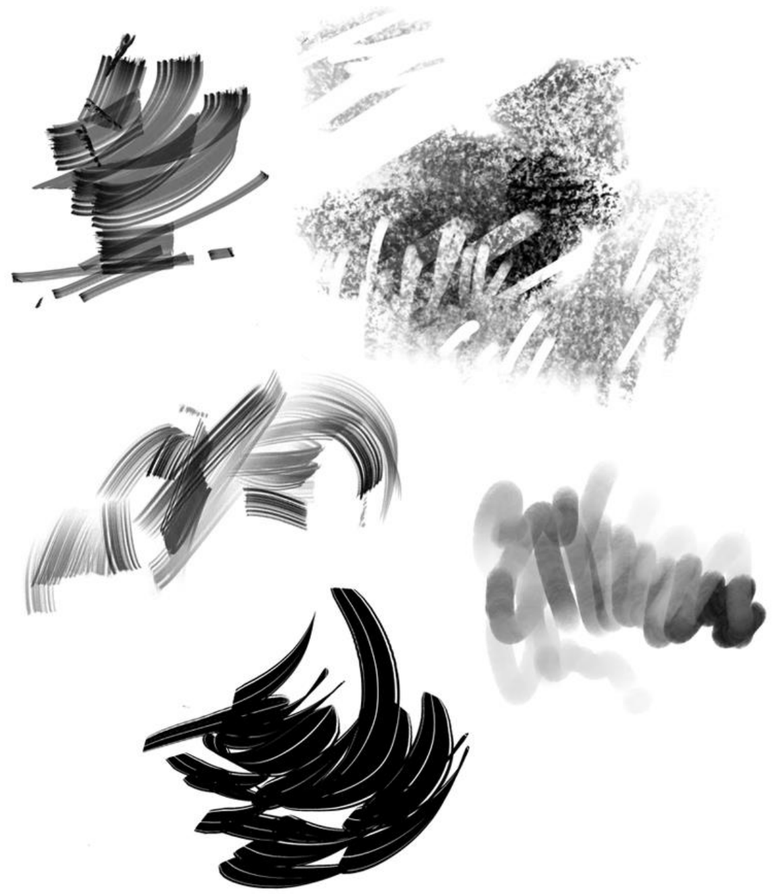
Add Textures



About Textures:

1. You can rotate them to fit your image - arrange how you see fit.

2. Use Blending Modes of the layer and change the hue of your texture. You can use Overlay, Soft Light, Multiply etc.

3. After you are done adding texture, paint until you finish your piece.

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Mix Textures and Painting (4/4)

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Painting

1. Painting is a process - it is very important to take your time with it.

2. Some other tips related to painting would be:

Color Dynamics
Various brush work

Want to learn more?

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Brushes build an artistic process, for most artists their entire life.

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Multiple Hands

Tips on Shapes

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Multiple Hands (2/4)

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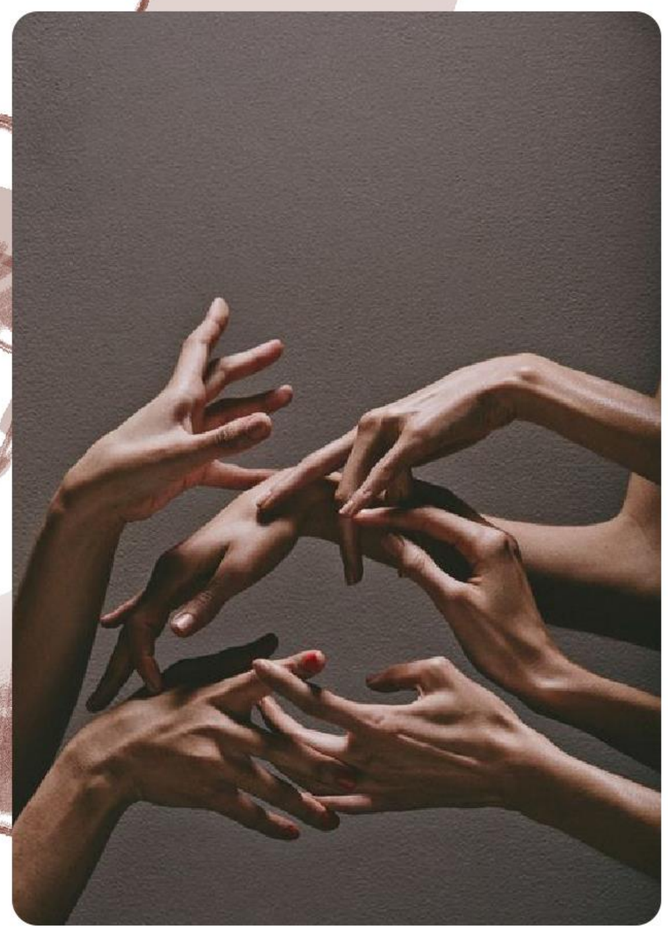

Reference

Drawing the base

Drawing remains a backbone on this one, simply because of the level of complexity it brings. Multiple hands interacting, it is quite the challenge, but also an interesting one after you get through it.

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Multiple Hands (3/4)

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Silhouette

Block-out silhouette

Shapes

Working with shapes is a slow process - you use the drawing - but slowly add in shapes to push your readability

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Multiple Hands (4/4)

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Check Your Values (1/4)

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Check Your Values!

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Check Your Values (2/4)

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We might’ve come across problems while painting in color. Something feels ‘off’ about the lighting, or the painting seems too ‘muddy.’ This might be an issue with the values in our work. To isolate the problem, check the painting in grayscale.

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Check Your Values (3/4)

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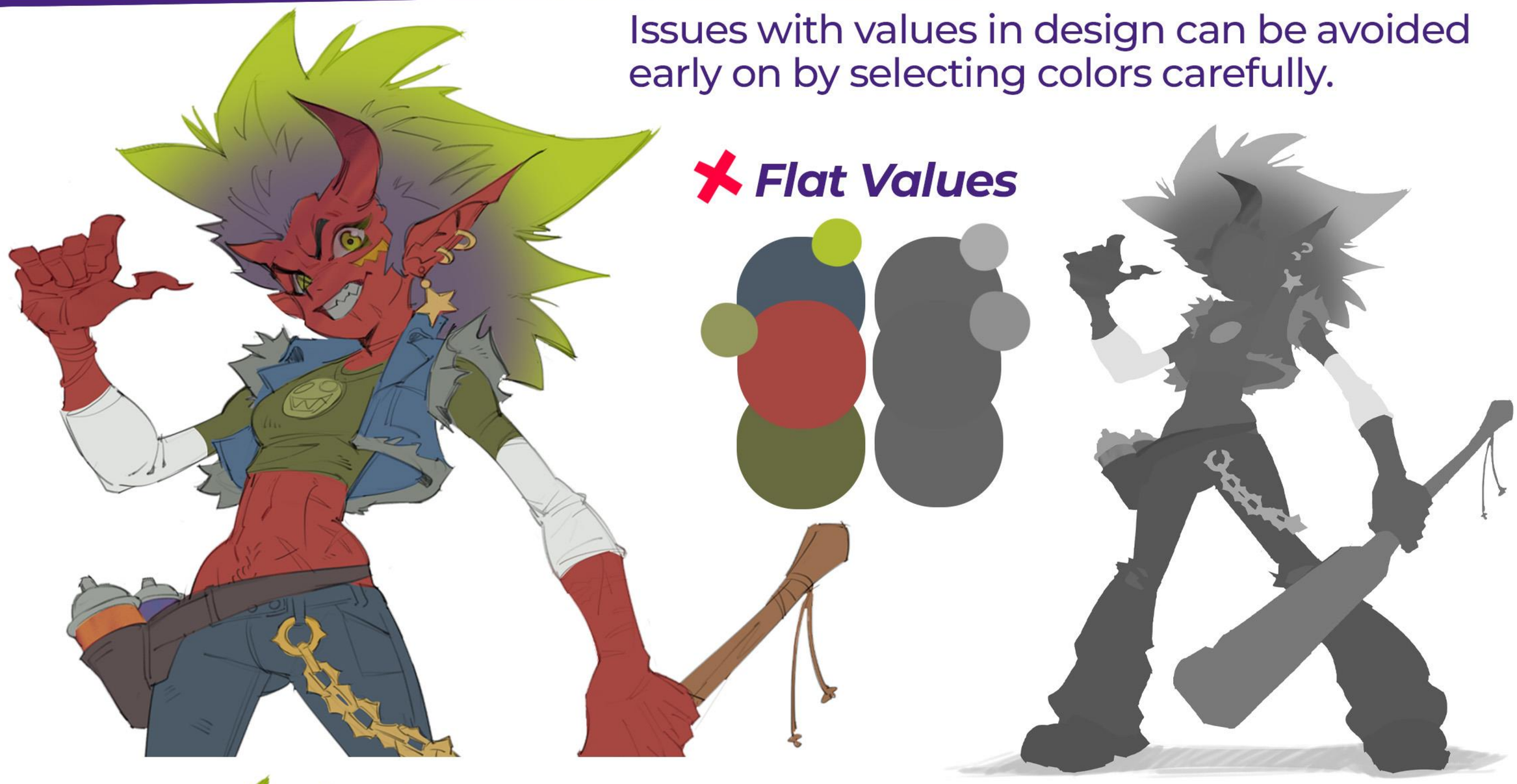
Issues with values in design can be avoided early on by selecting colors carefully.

✗ ***Flat Values***



✓ ***Better Value Range***

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Check Your Values (4/4)

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By checking the values in grayscale, we can better determine what needs to be added or adjusted.

If the values look good in the initial blockout stage, the rendering will be much easier!

See how unclear values can actually create muddy colors in this free lesson

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Values & Shapes (1/4)

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Values & Shapes

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Values & Shapes (2/4)

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Sketch

Blocking

The initial sketch can be simple—it's just a guide for proportions and form. Since we'll be painting, there's no need for extensive line art.

It's important to be critical during the blocking stage, as this allows us to check values and colors before investing time and energy into detailing.

If the features read clearly using just two values, we're on the right track.

Colors

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Values & Shapes (3/4)

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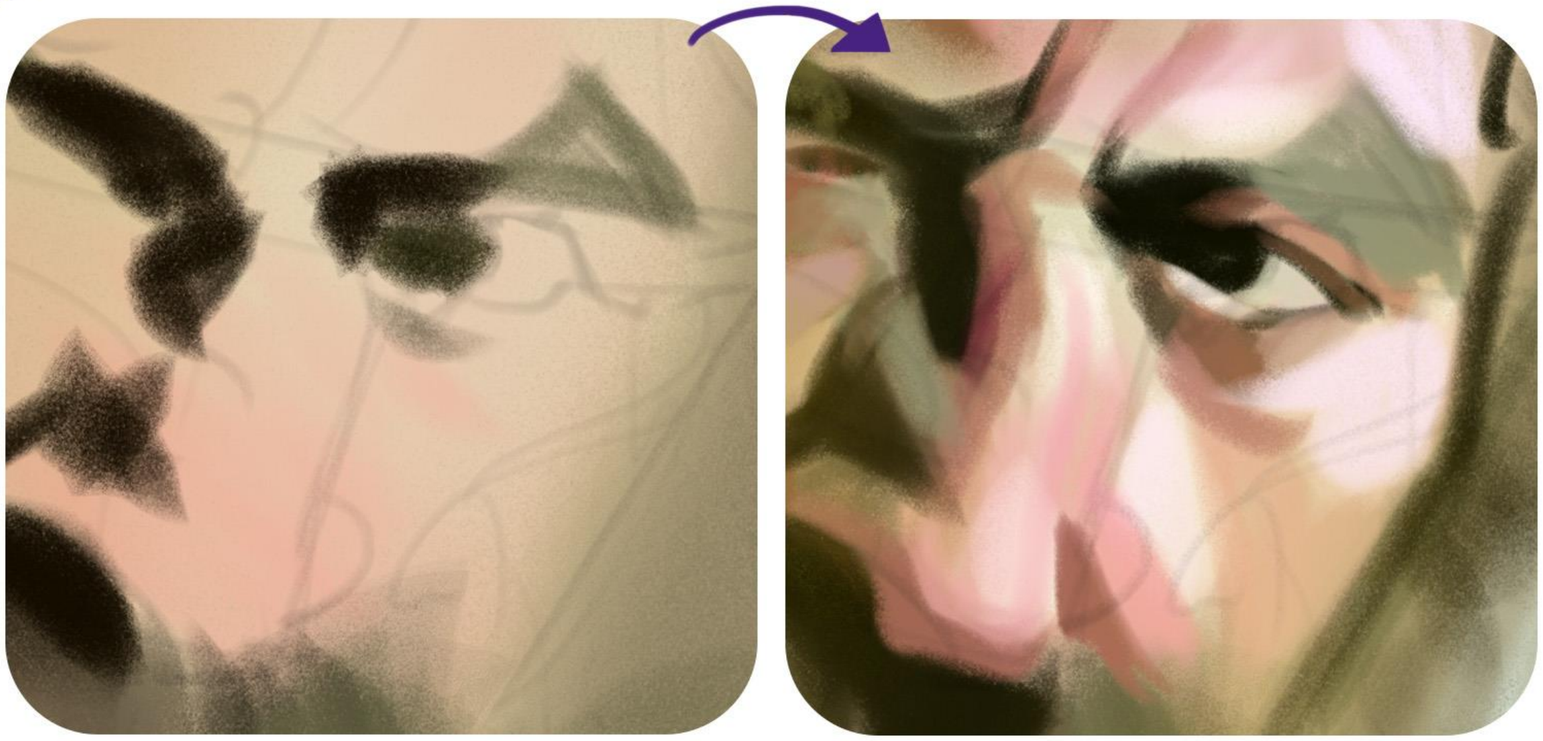
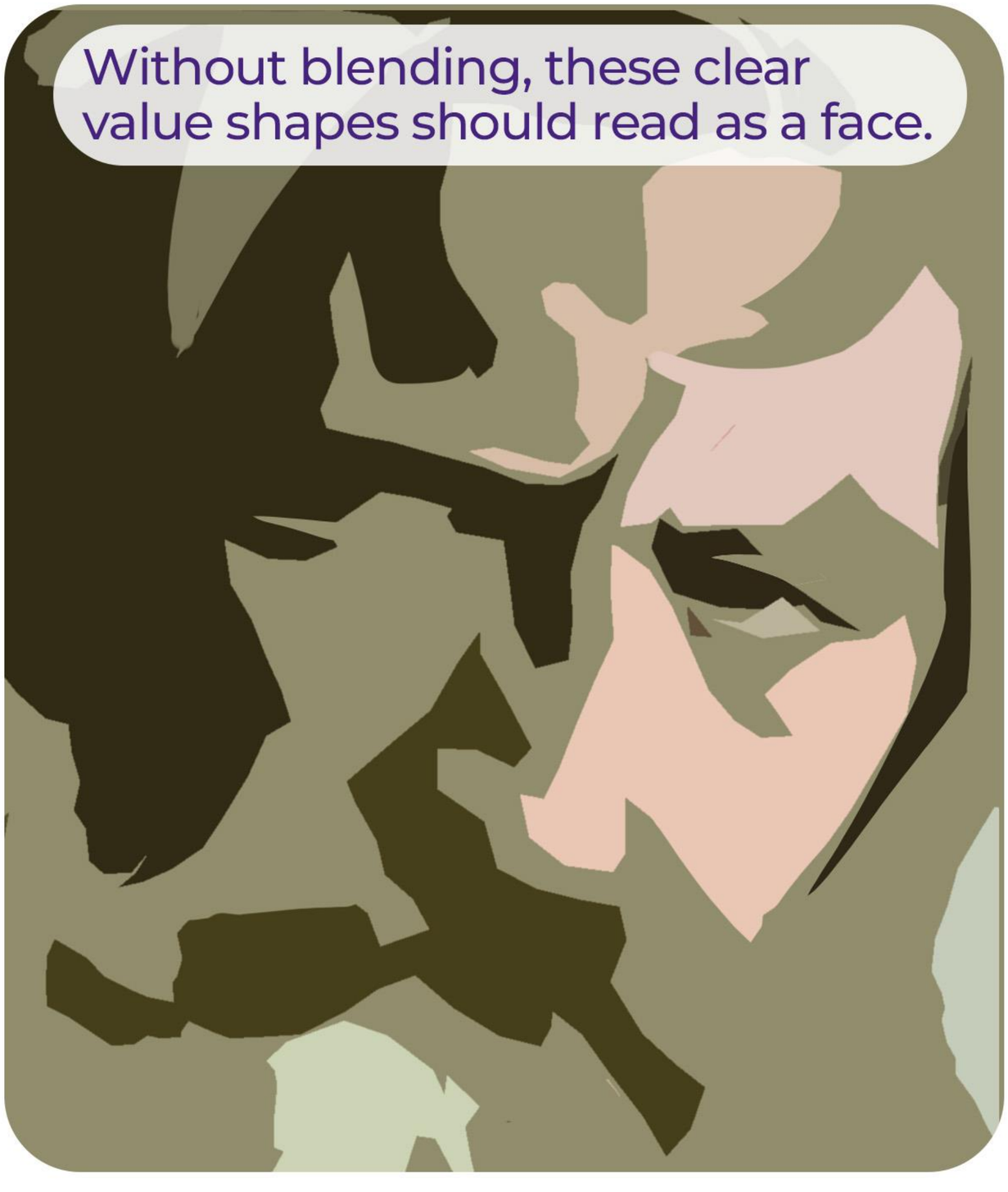


After blocking in the portrait, we'll introduce more value steps. Think of values as shapes to add. Squint your eyes or view your artwork from a distance to ensure it remains readable from afar.

Don't worry too much about colors—if the values read well, the painting should work.



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Values & Shapes (4/4)

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As we refine the painting and check the values carefully, we can blend and add details until we're satisfied. At this stage, introducing hue variation and experimenting with color becomes easier since we're more confident in our values!

Colors

Values

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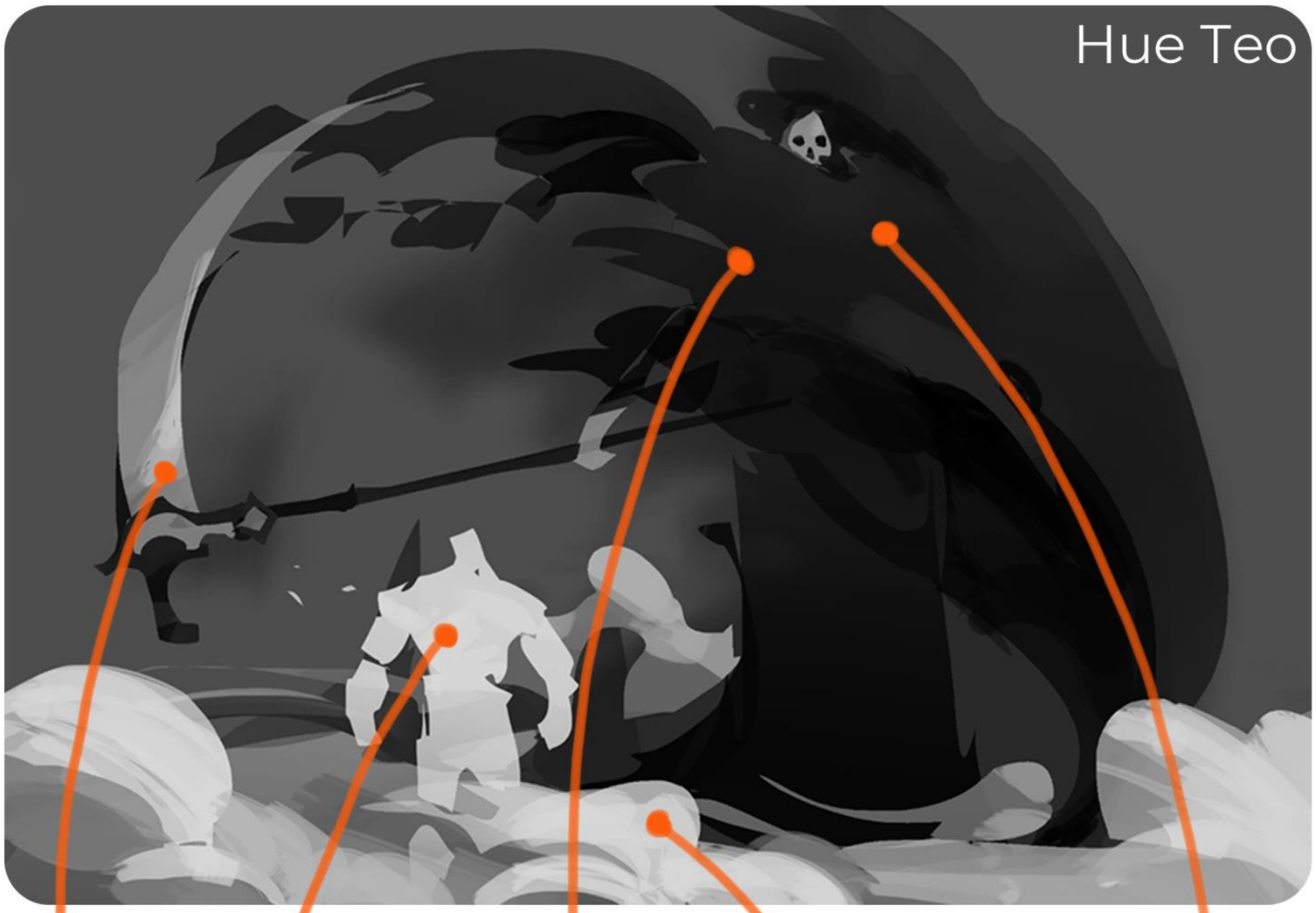
Sketches in a New Style



To translate a **sketch** into a **different style**, the key ideas and elements need to stay intact.
Characters, composition, action, as well as tone and atmosphere need to be considered.

There is more room for **interpretation** in less defined areas of a sketch. In this case: the lighting.

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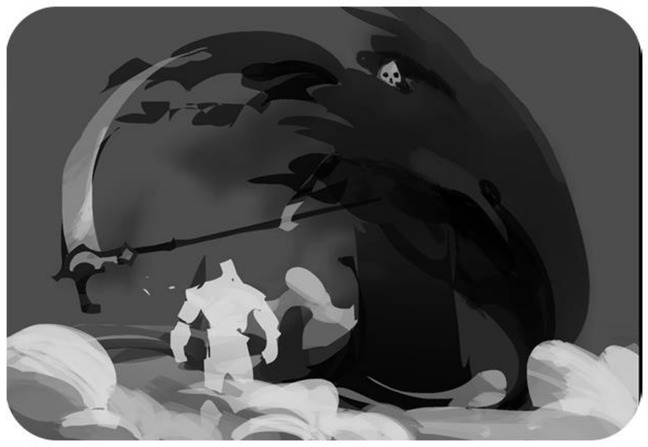
Sketches in a New Style (3/4)



To reinforce the core idea of a sketch or painting, enhance existing elements.
Introduce new changes to push the original theme and idea further.

The **contrast** between the knight and Death is interesting, so lowering the viewing angle to push it further makes sense.

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Sketches in a New Style (4/4)

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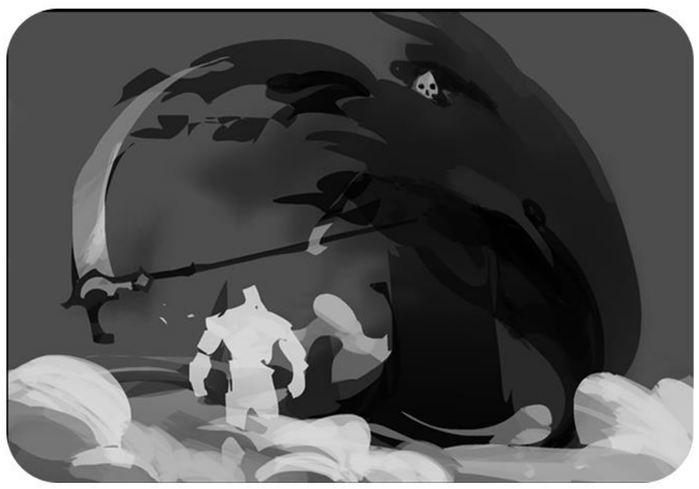
Value is used to distinguish the 2D shapes in the original sketch. Amending the value structure to work as light in a physical space is a key step in translating the sketch into this different style.

More fundamental **value changes** are required to create convincing light and shadow in the new style.
In this case, the knight silhouette changed from light to dark. The core idea is still the same though.



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“Shades of grey,
and black and white
play together in the night.”

A Poet

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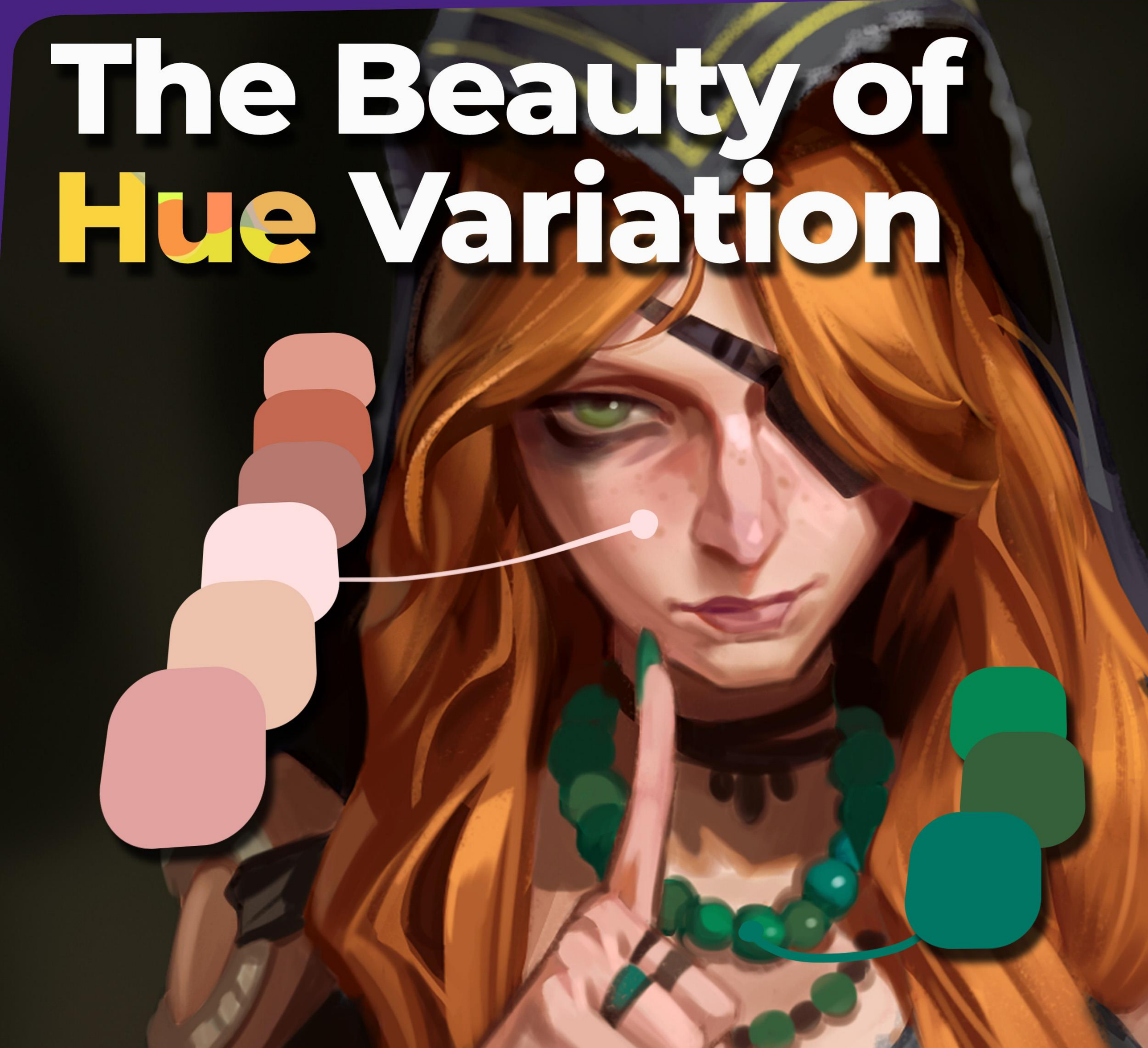
to go to the course

The Beauty of Hue Variation



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The Beauty of Hue Variation (2/4)

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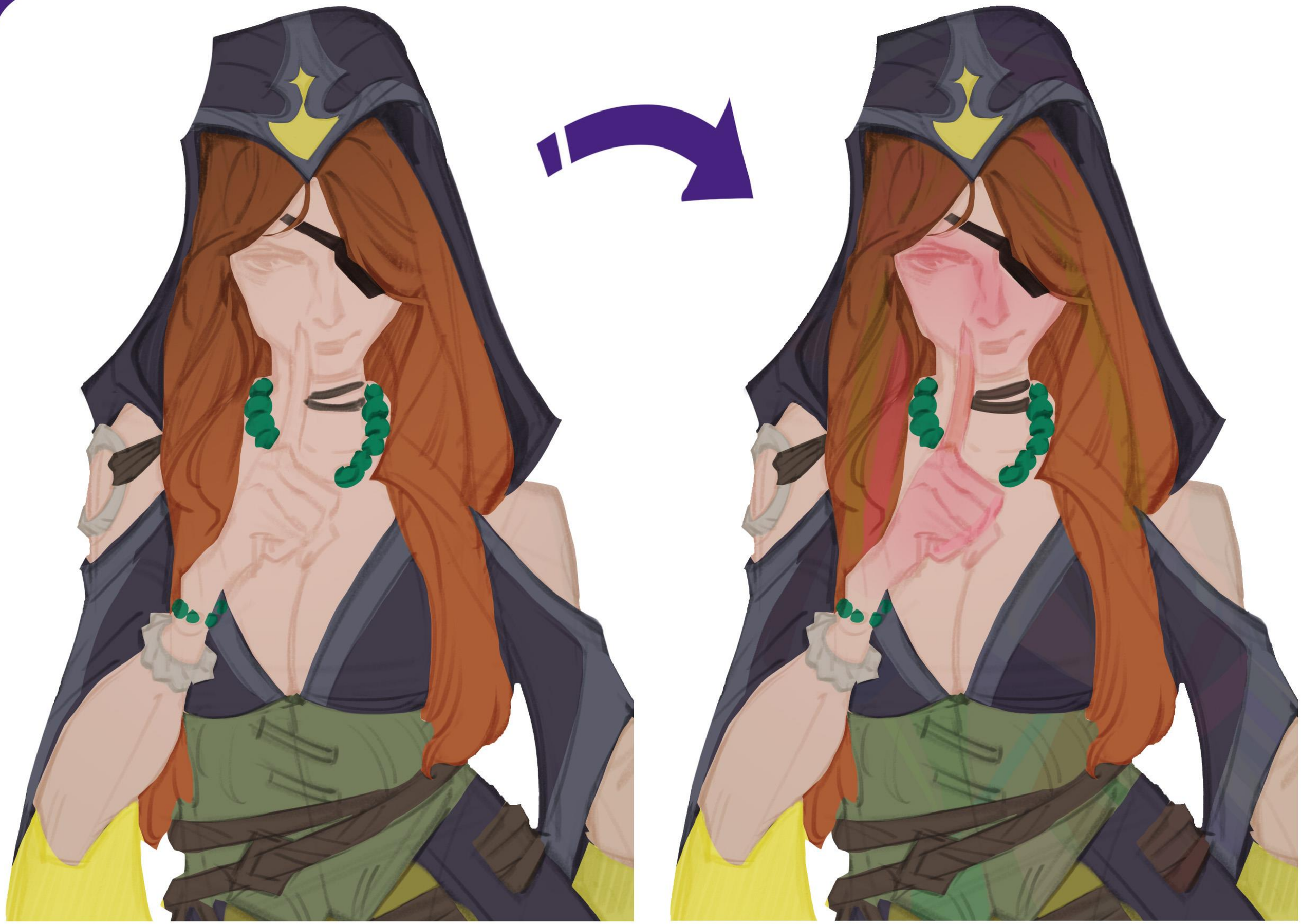

Hue variation refers to the range of different hues used within a composition or applied to a particular subject. It involves shifting the hues to create interest, depth, and complexity in a piece.
We can easily add hue variation in skin, ranging from brown to pink as an example.

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The Beauty of Hue Variation (3/4)

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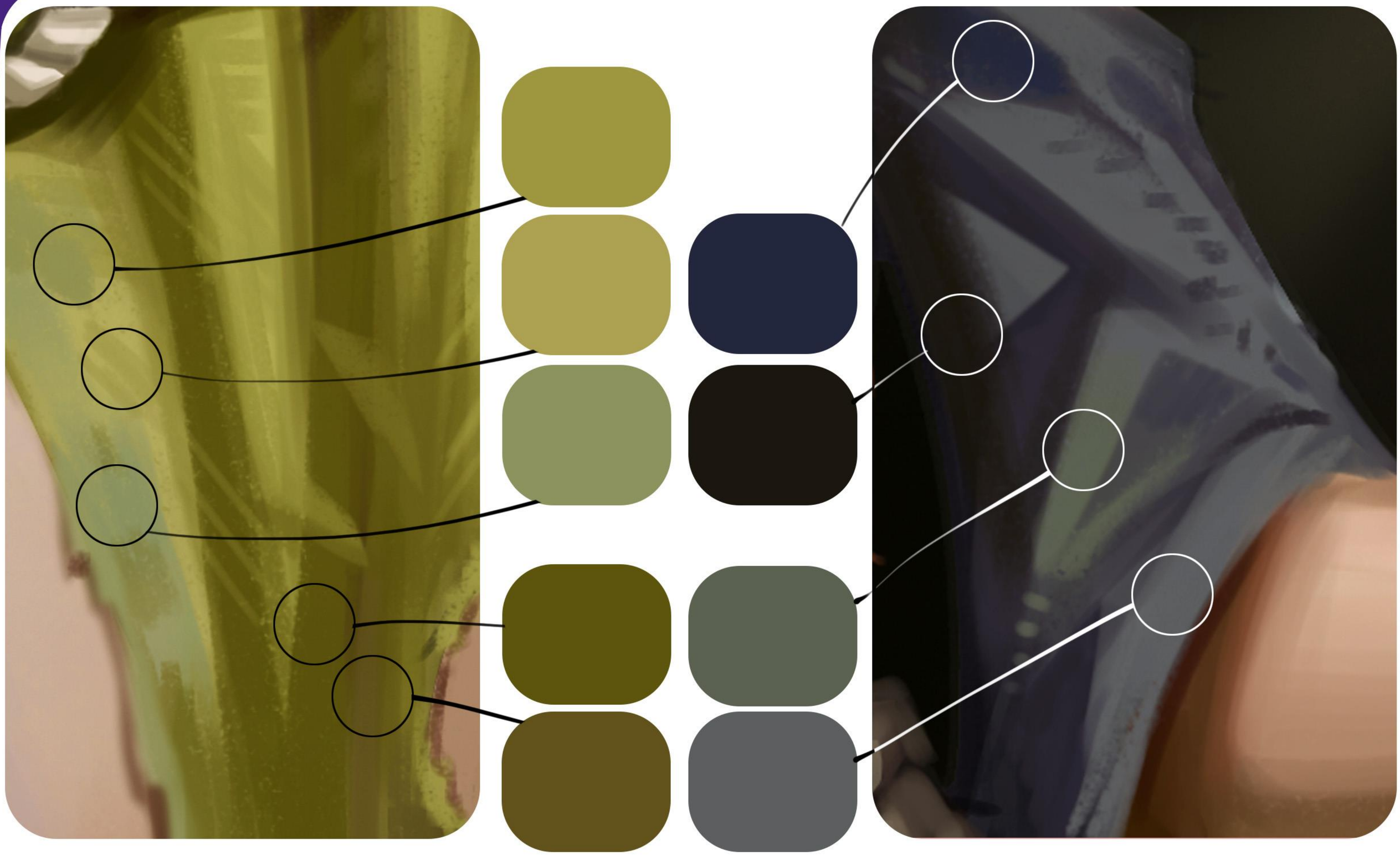
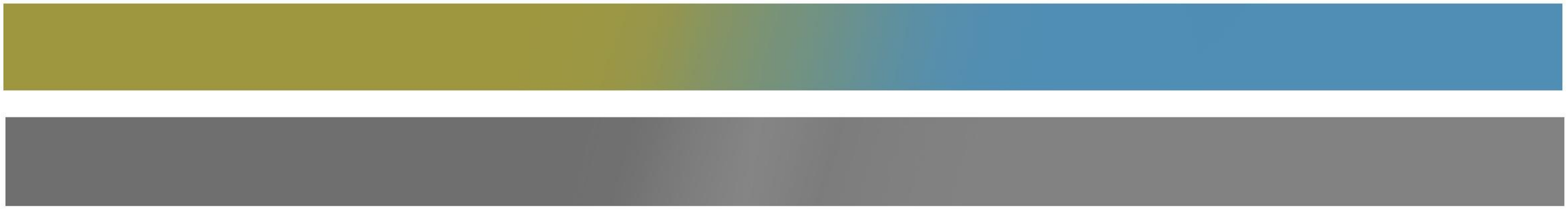


If we focus on one area, we can introduce hue variation to enhance visual interest. The effect is subtle but impactful, adding more depth and intrigue to the piece. In these instances, the variation is often felt more than it is seen.



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The Beauty of Hue Variation (4/4)

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Alternatively, we can focus on emphasizing hue variations. This is a deliberate stylistic decision, serving as a way to artistically express ourselves.

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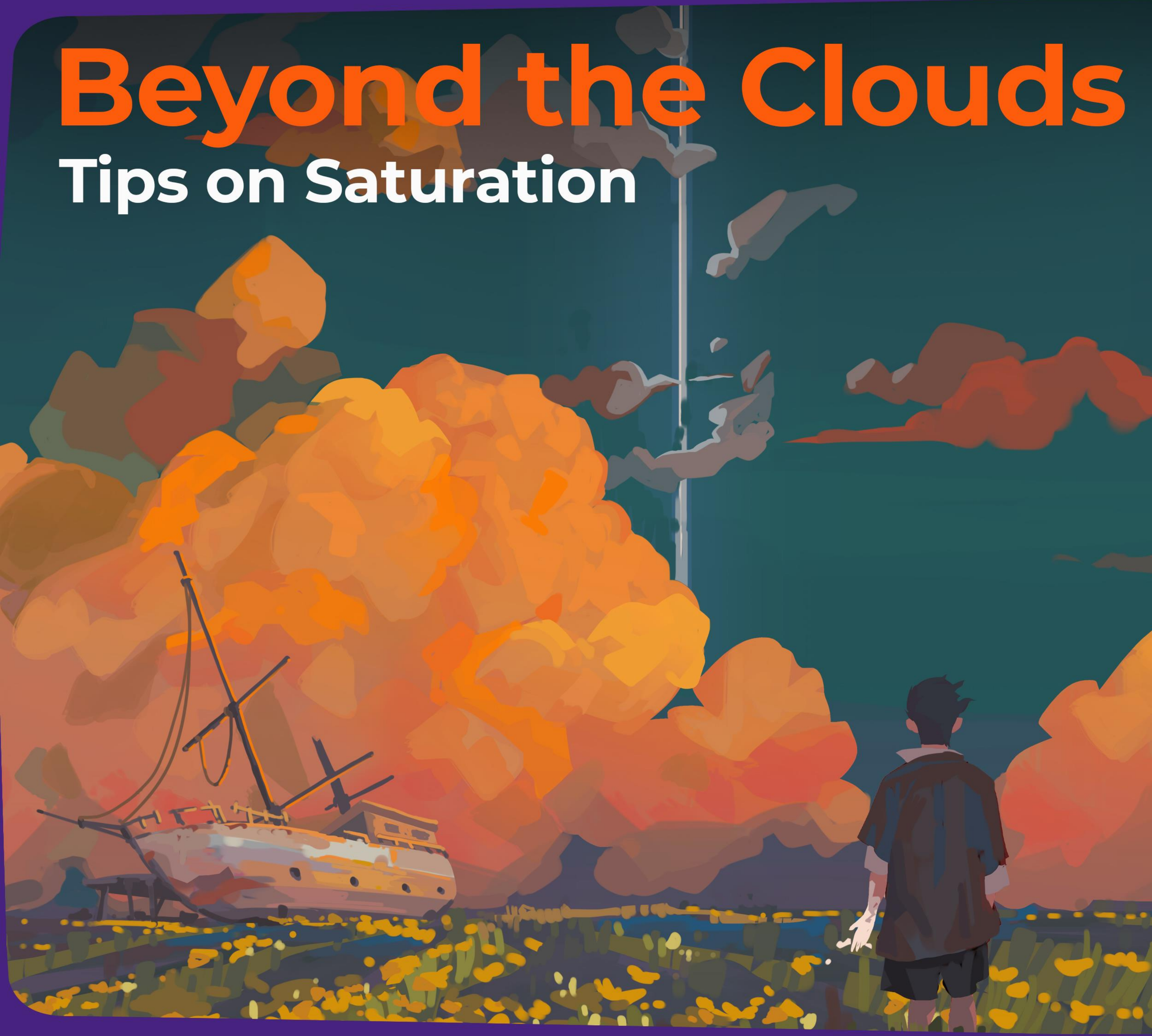
Beyond the Clouds

Tips on Saturation



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Beyond the Clouds (2/4)

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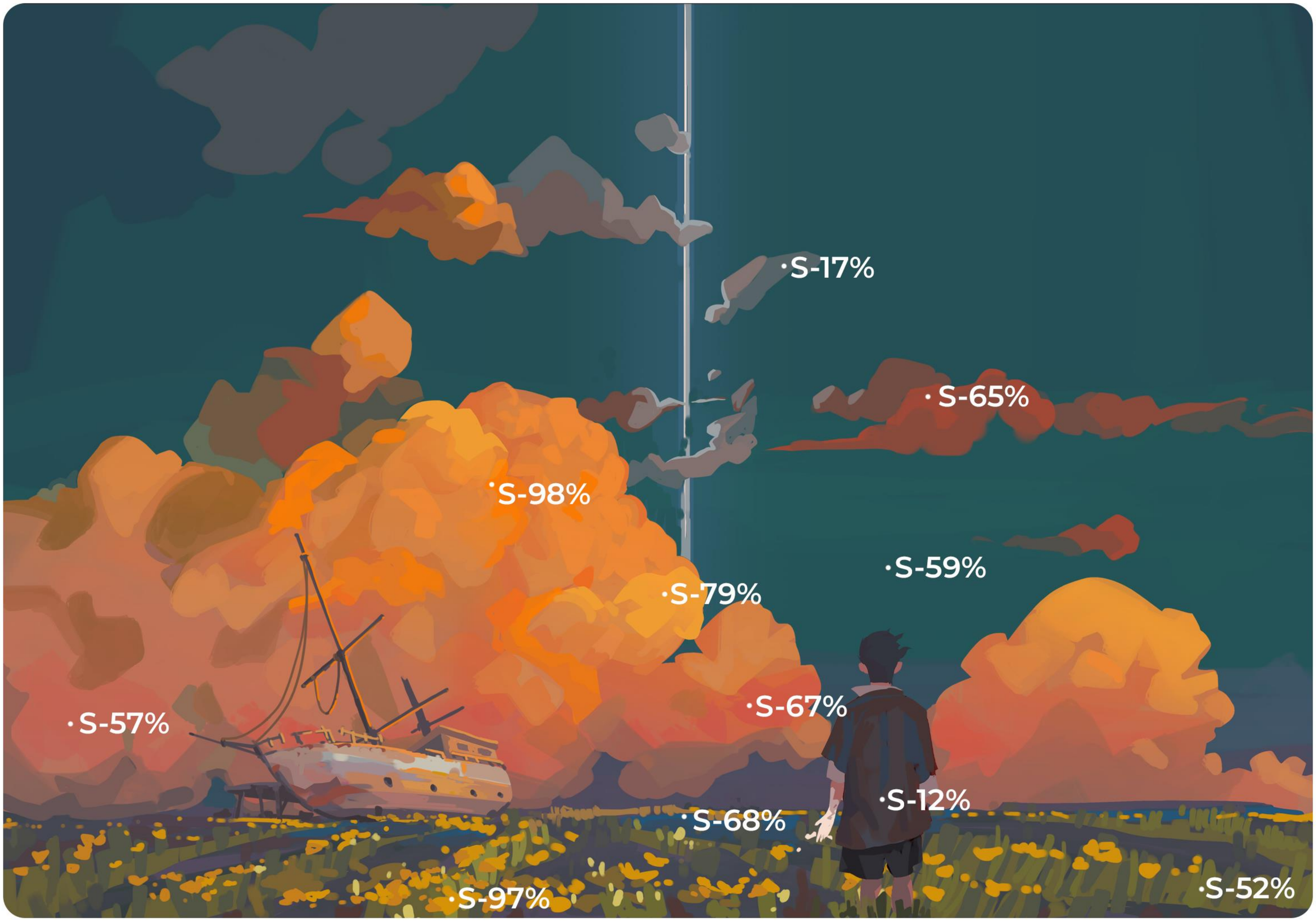


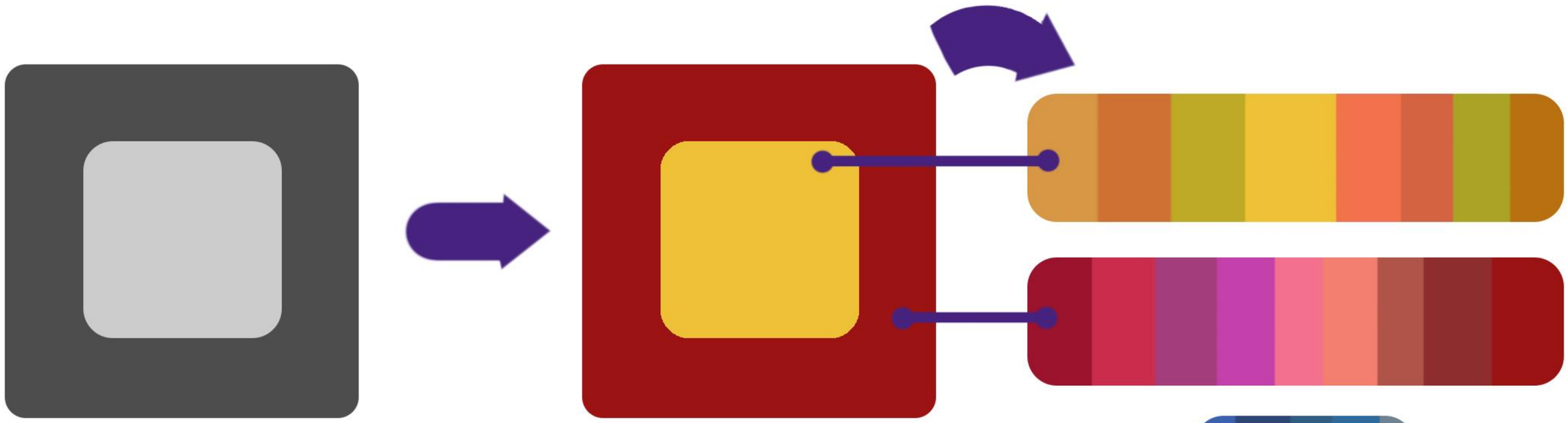
Brightness - 82% to 34% for BG

45-48 percentile point range

Darkest Value

Controlling the value through saturation is not easy. It requires some clear planning, as follows:

1. Limiting value range - 40-50-60 percentiles (ex. 30% Brightness to 80% Brightness - value range)



50% Value Variation

Colors with 50% Value Variation

Saturated Color Palette

2. Building Color Palette - Control of Value - keeping in mind Saturation.

3. Thumbnails using the built Color Palette

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Beyond the Clouds (4/4)

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After you sketch a thumbnail - you can continue to work on it, adjust colors wherever necessary, but keep true to the color palette. High Saturation is hard to control, and it can only be achieved through practice!

Have fun and hope you enjoyed the tip!

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The Yak

Tips on warm and cold hues

Everything starts with reference

We have 2 references here that are clearely presented. The first one we will use as base, and from the seccond one we will take the girl and add her on top of Yak in the first image.

+

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The Yak (3/4)

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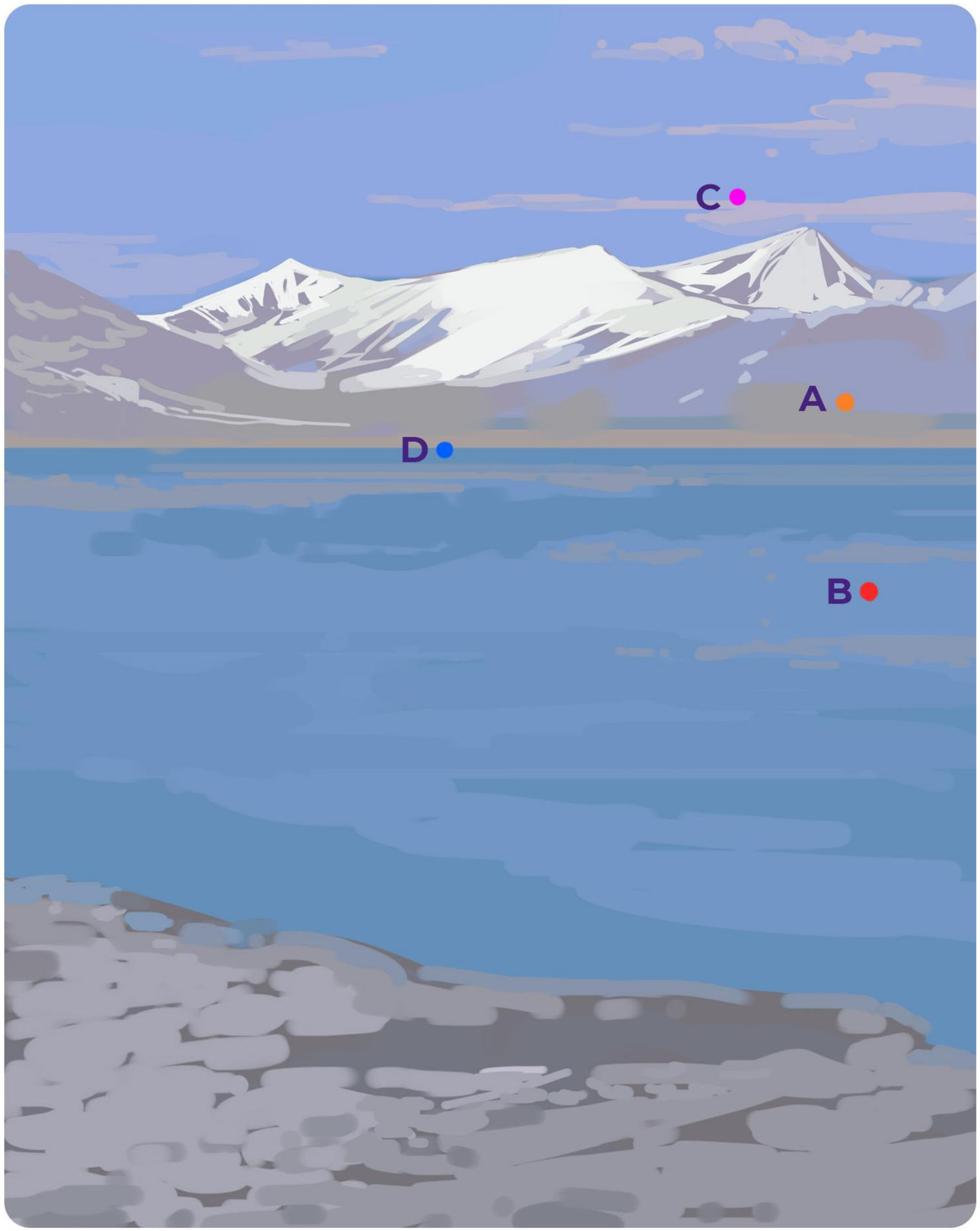

Let us discuss about Hues and how these Hues affect our painting.

Just using close values and different hues - Warm vs Cold - we notice how we employ the principle of Variety.

You can also create higher contrast - but it's important to pay more attention to the warm and cold hues.

Whenever you want to build a scene, it is important to to pay attention to how colors interact with each other.

Keep layers simple

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The Yak (4/4)

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Grey tones and various Hue shifts that we notice - help us to not only get better at using color, but better at making each color interaction count in the painting process.

We also notice that the color accents are way more saturated and they create areas of interest and contrast.

Now go try this out, and see what you can learn yourself!

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Dreamy Color Picking (1/4)

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Dreamy Color Picking (2/4)

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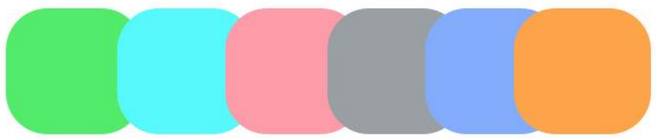

The colors are light in tone with moderately high saturation.

The iridescent colors are lightly glazed over the portrait to add hue variation without letting the iridescence completely take over.

The ***'dreamy'*** look we are aiming for is influenced by iridiescence. ***Iridescence*** is a shimmering effect where colors shift depending on the light and viewing angle, like the surface of a soap bubble. In this portrait, I'm planning on incorporating some iridescent tones to create a soft, dreamy atmosphere.

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Dreamy Color Picking (3/4)

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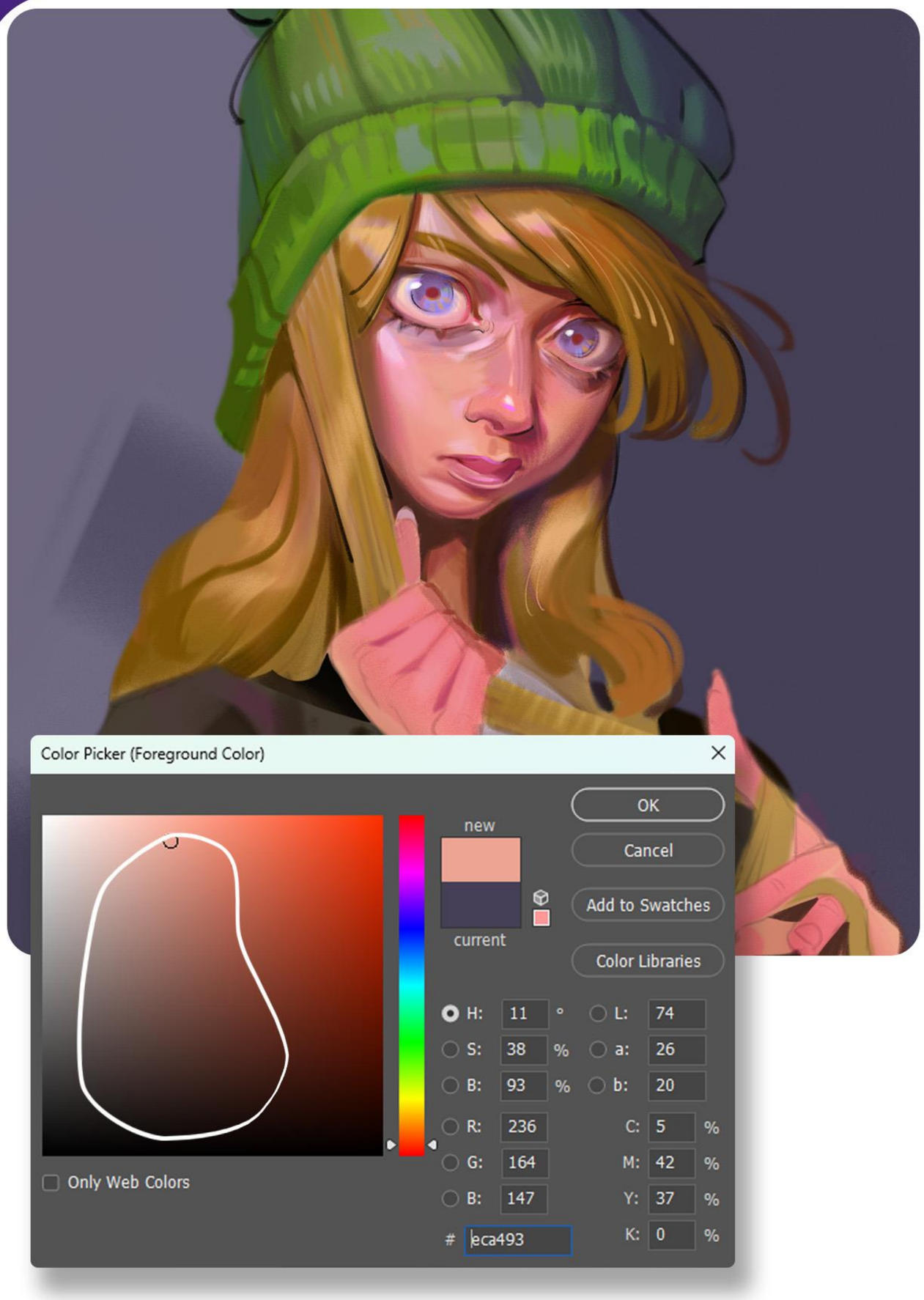
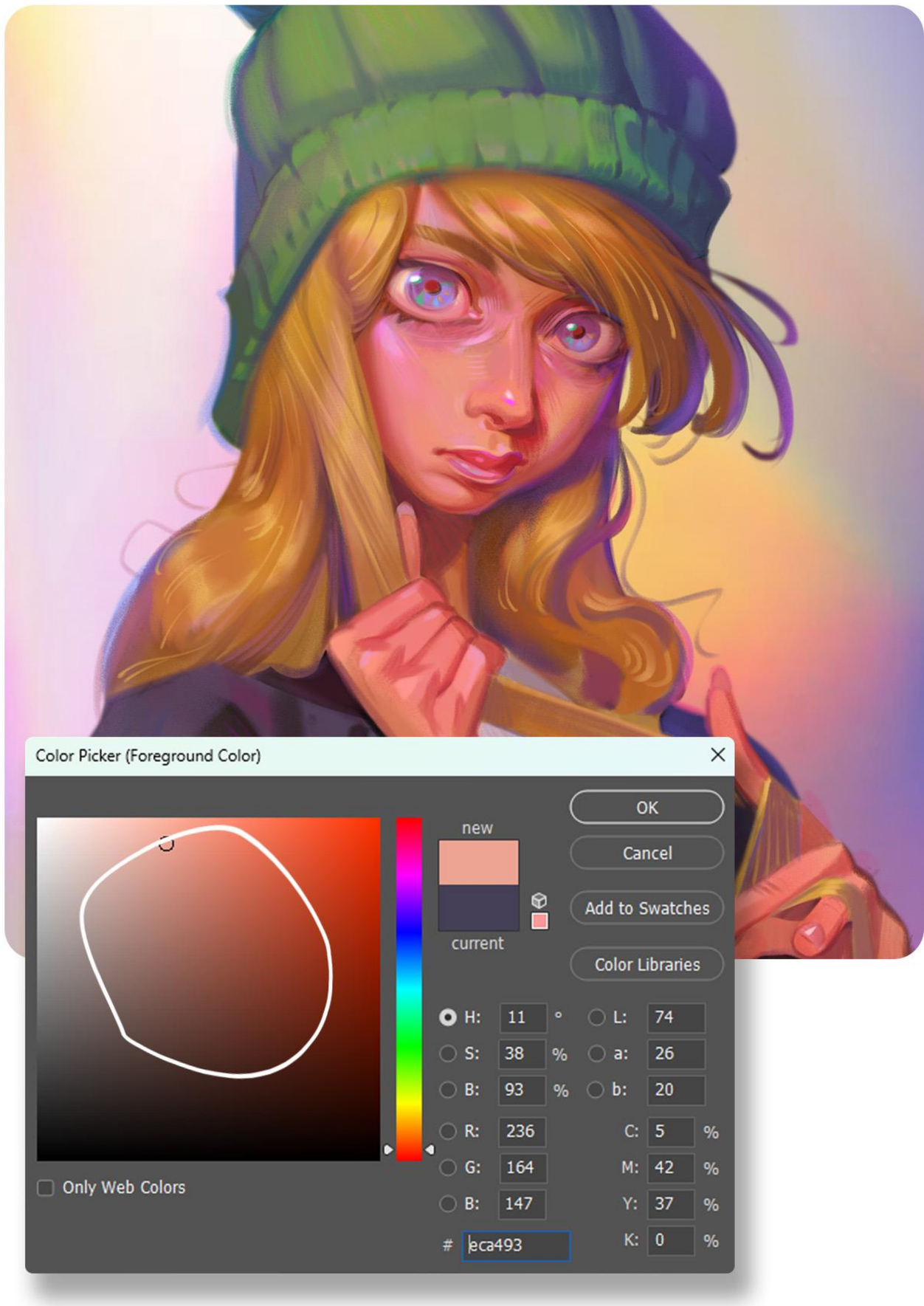


Here, the colors are too muddy for the effect we want. Most of our color choices are fairly dark and desaturated



By choosing more saturated and lighter tones, we can achieve a softer feel. However, it's important not to go too saturated, as it can become overwhelming.

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Dreamy Color Picking (4/4)

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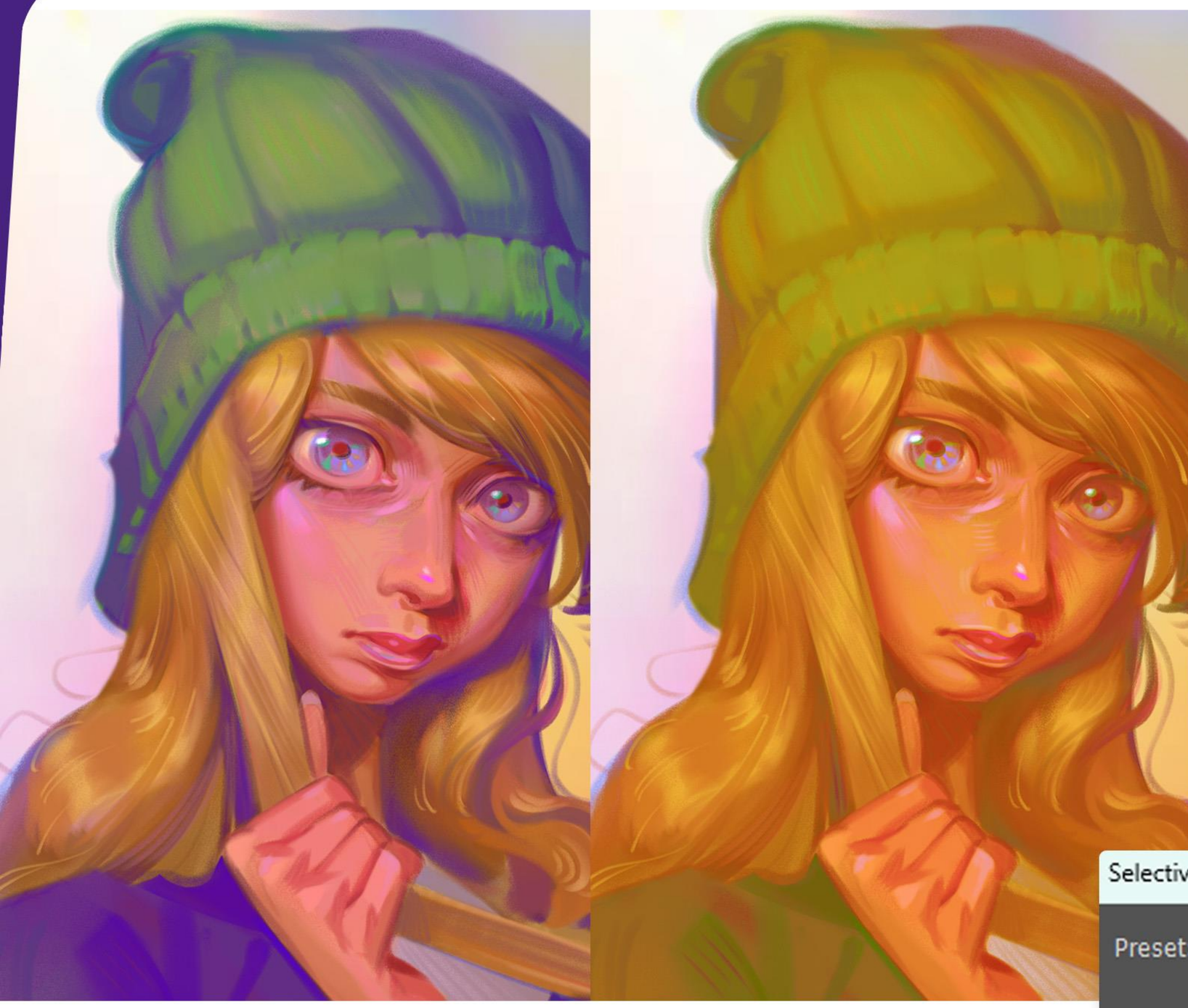

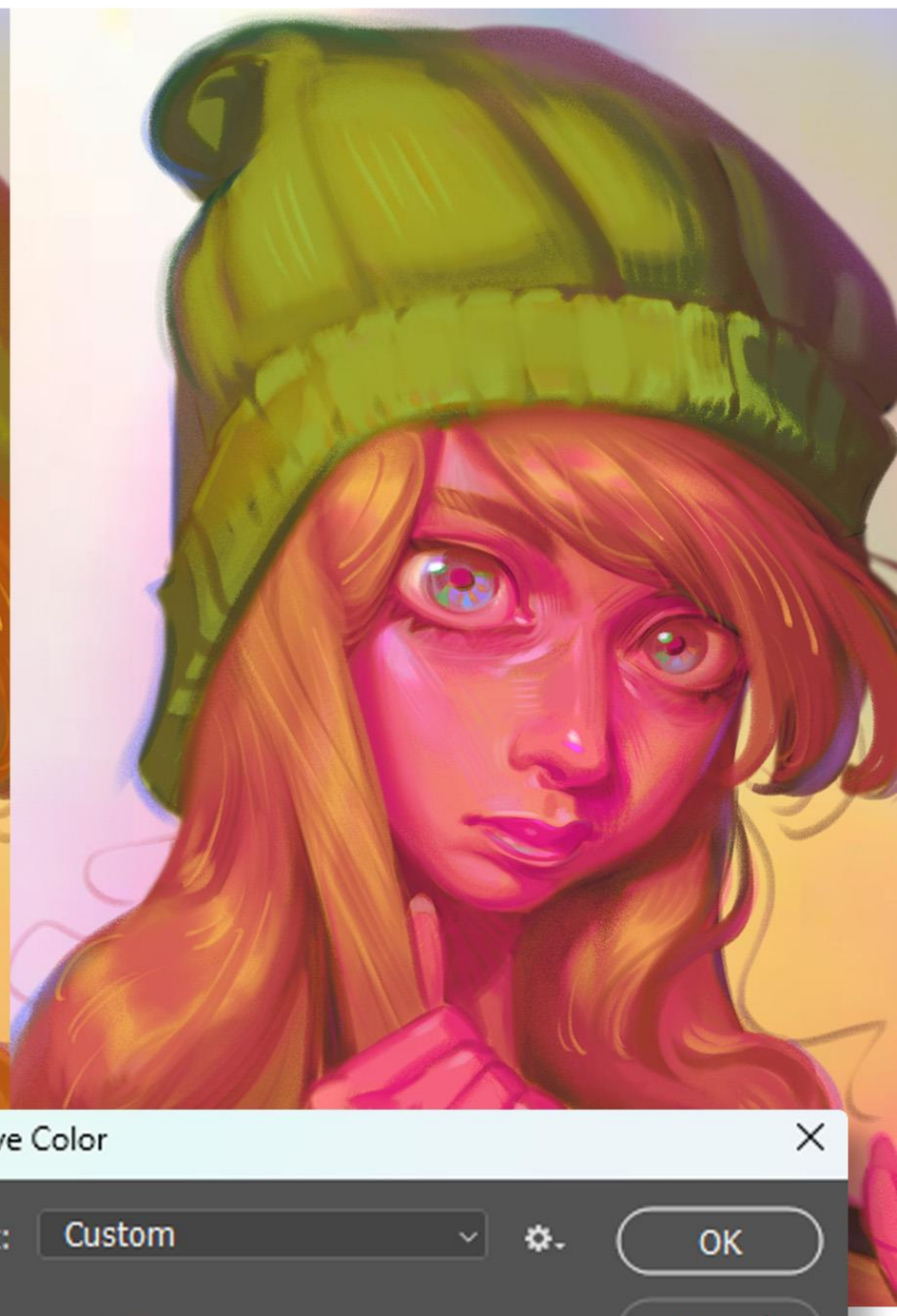

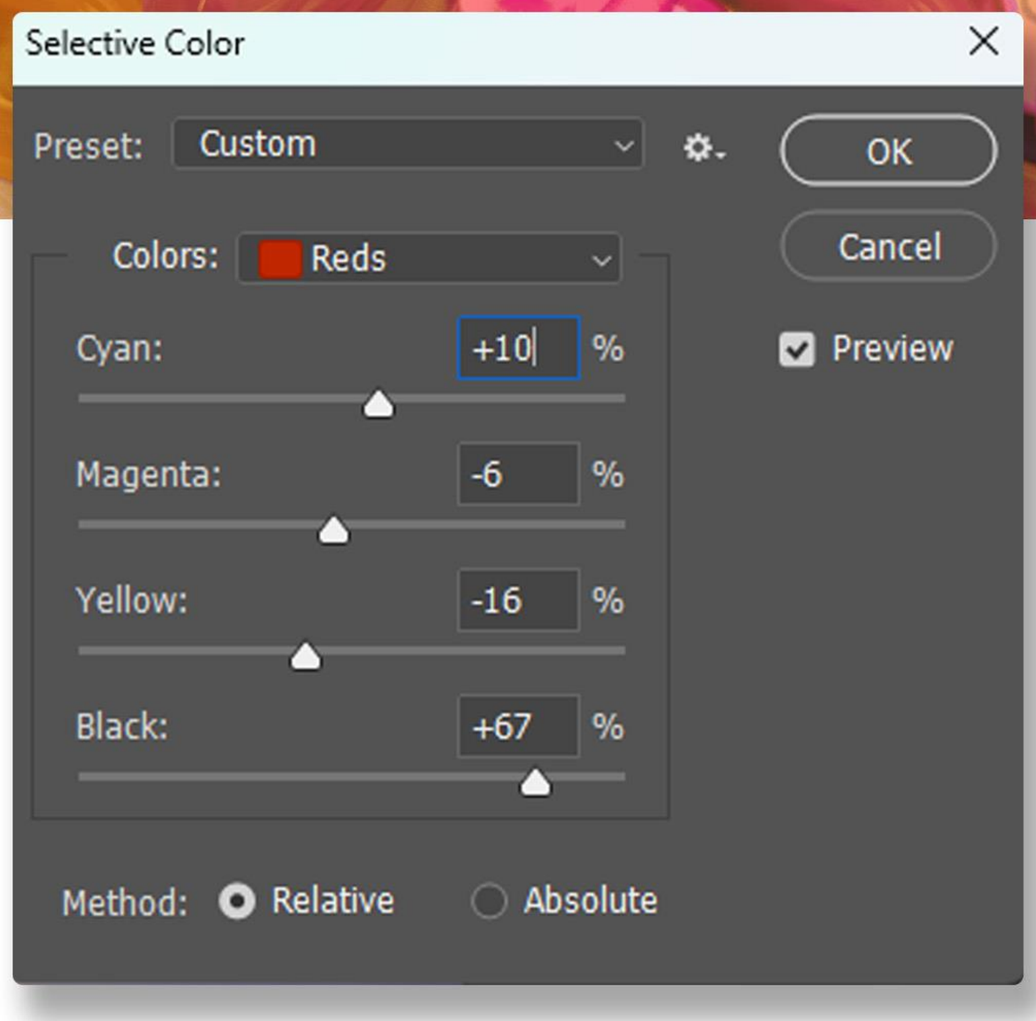

A useful trick for better color control is using ***Selective Color*** and adjusting different color channels.
For example, you can shift all reds toward cyan or make your blue colors darker and so on.

Go to ***Image*** → ***Adjustments*** → ***Selective Color*** and experiment!

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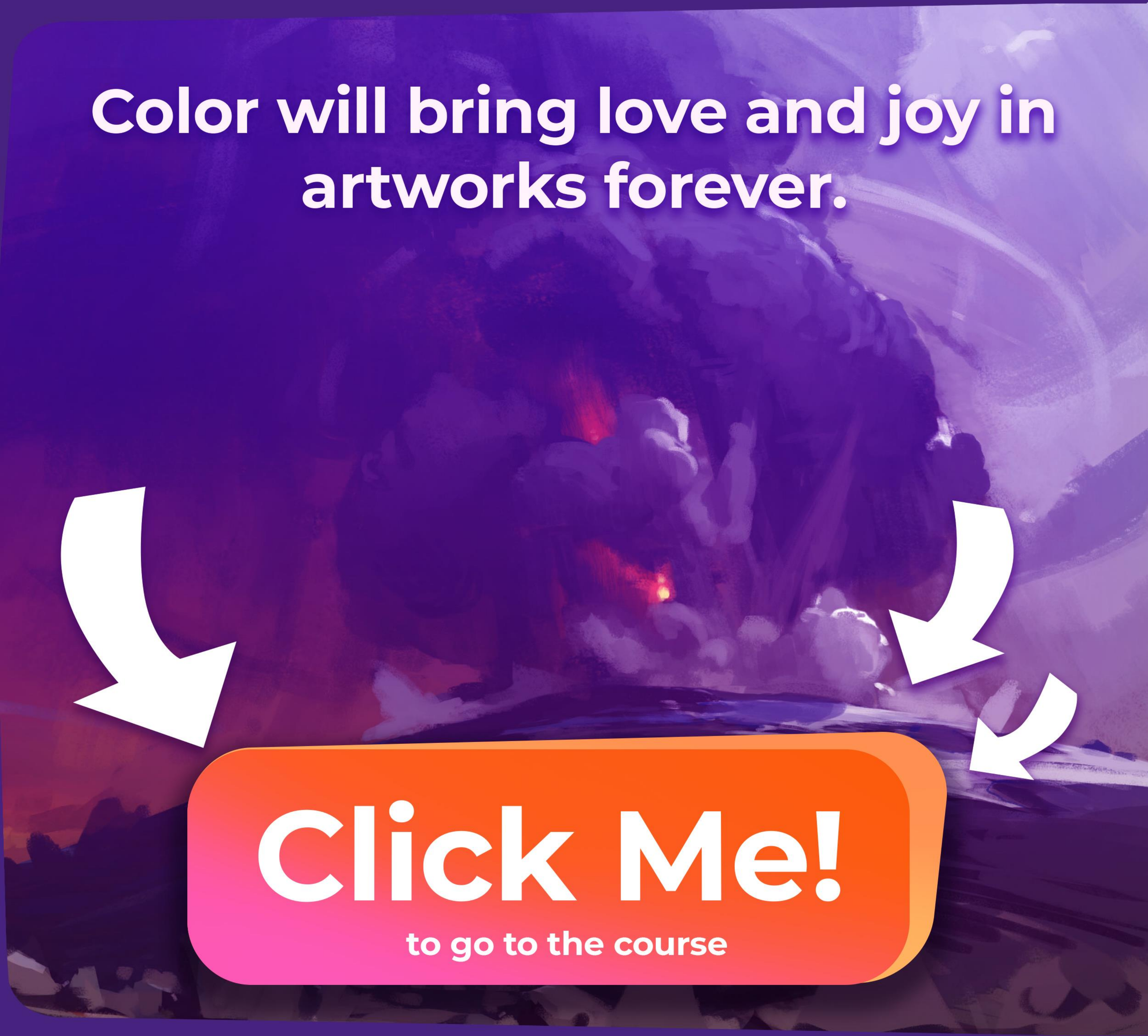

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Moonlight Colors

Tips on Value & Color

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Moonlight Colors (2/4)

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Value Keys

Value is one of the main things that will affect your night scenes.

Color builds intricate areas of contrast - in most regions making this process quite simple. Simplicity is devised by areas of contrast - and areas of combining those areas of contrast with areas of rest.

Low Value Key - is the primary used in Night scenes

Let us go into Simplicity

Often times, we get entangled in complex matters when it comes to a scene, but it's a lot easier to understand something if you keep things simple. For the case at hand: 2 hills - one moon - a couple of trees and foliage - one character - and some fireflies - keeps things clear and simple.

It does not have to be a grand piece - you can keep it simple and focus just on color and value.

Simplicity of structure and value are key

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Moonlight Colors (4/4)

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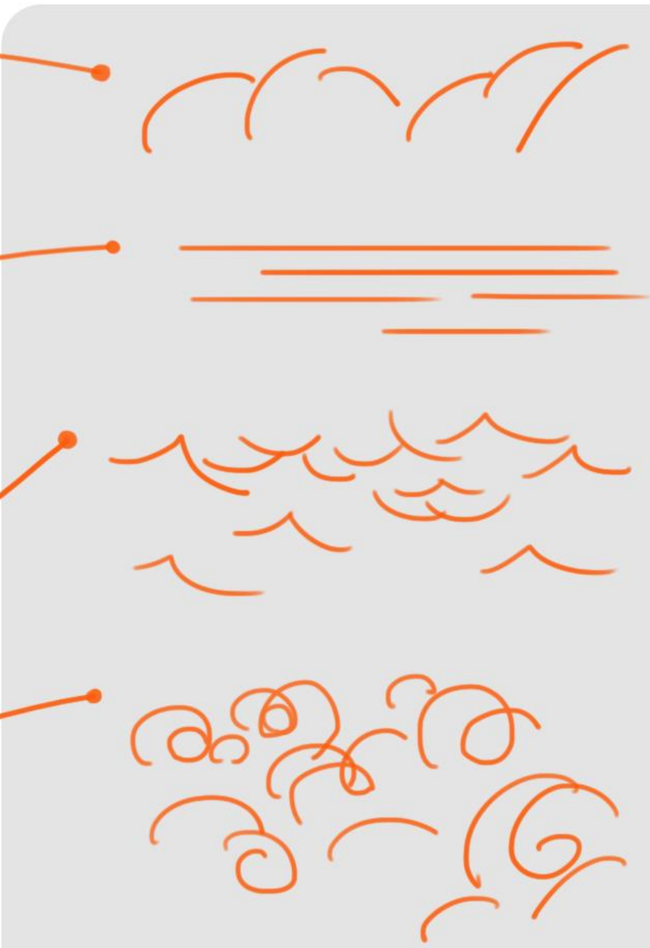
Mark Making Tips



Mark making can make a big difference in the way you paint. Before painting - you might want to try drawing - scribble and see how it looks. Usually if it looks good - your painting will look good too!

Some color palettes to help you with night scenes:

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Night Shades

Tips on Layers and Color

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Night Shades (2/4)

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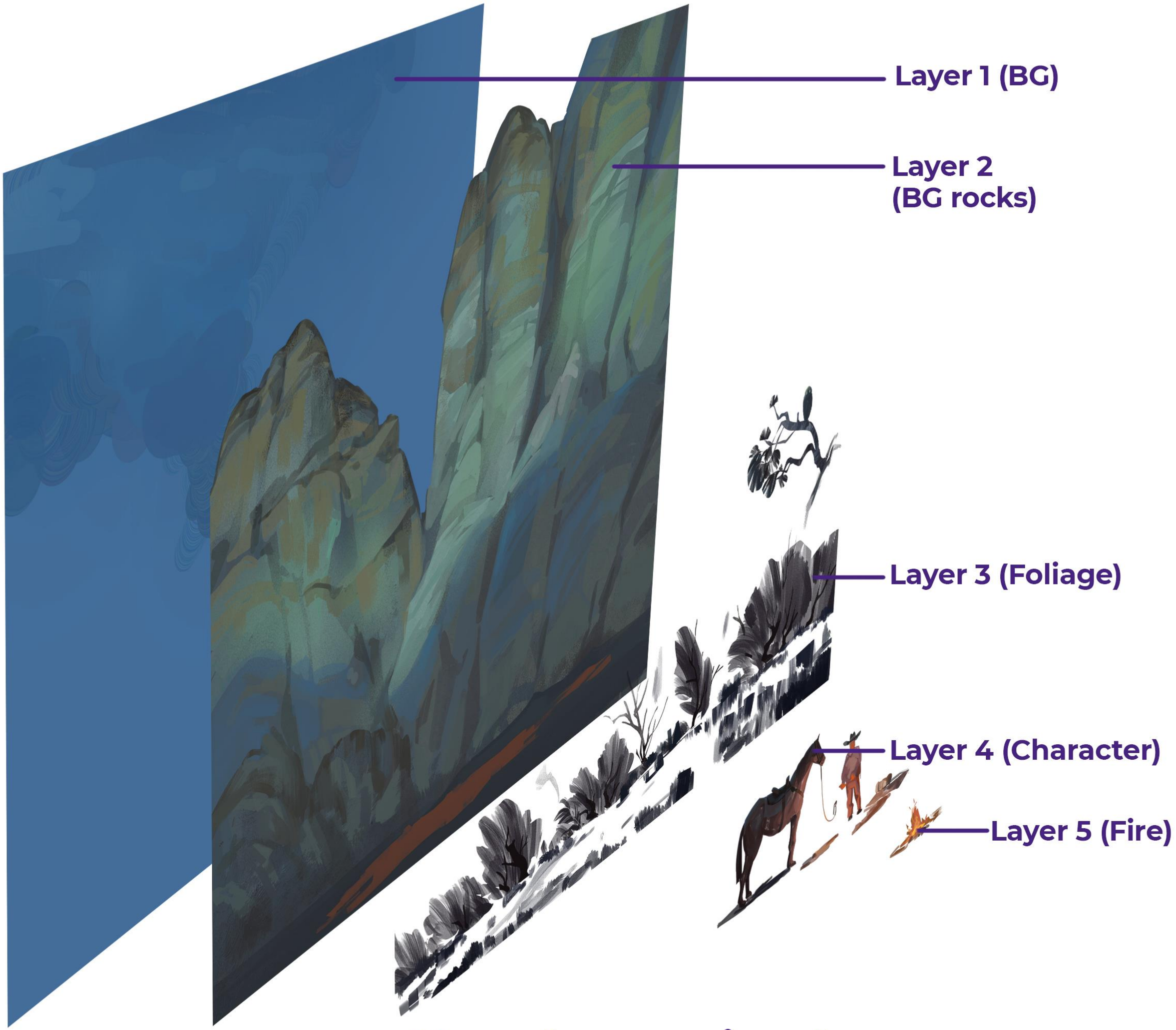

Keep layers simple

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Night Shades (3/4)

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Night Shades (4/4)

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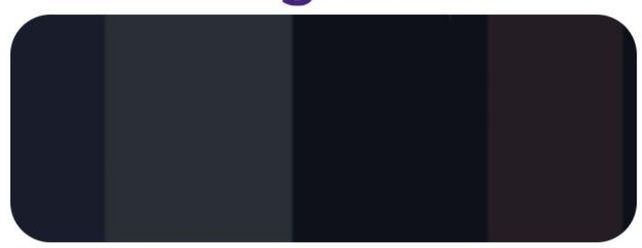
Simplicity of Silhouettes

- For the horse and our little character, the silhouettes read clearly - meaning we notice them easily at a glance.
- For the general foliage - we notice the shapes of various types quite easily as well - and as you notice, they are also simplified.

Background

Midground

Foreground



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Light and shadows play within a frame, and you gotta learn how they do that.

Click Me!

to go to the course

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Color Gradients (1/4)

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Color Gradients

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Color Gradients (2/4)

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Local Colors

Color gradients can have a strong impact on depth and visual interest. They behave as if different colored light sources are present. In this case, we have a cool light from the left and a warm light from the right.

When setting local colors, we need to make sure the values are readable from a distance. It's best to have two to three dominant colors. Here, we have orange and cyan.

Color Gradients

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Color Gradients (3/4)

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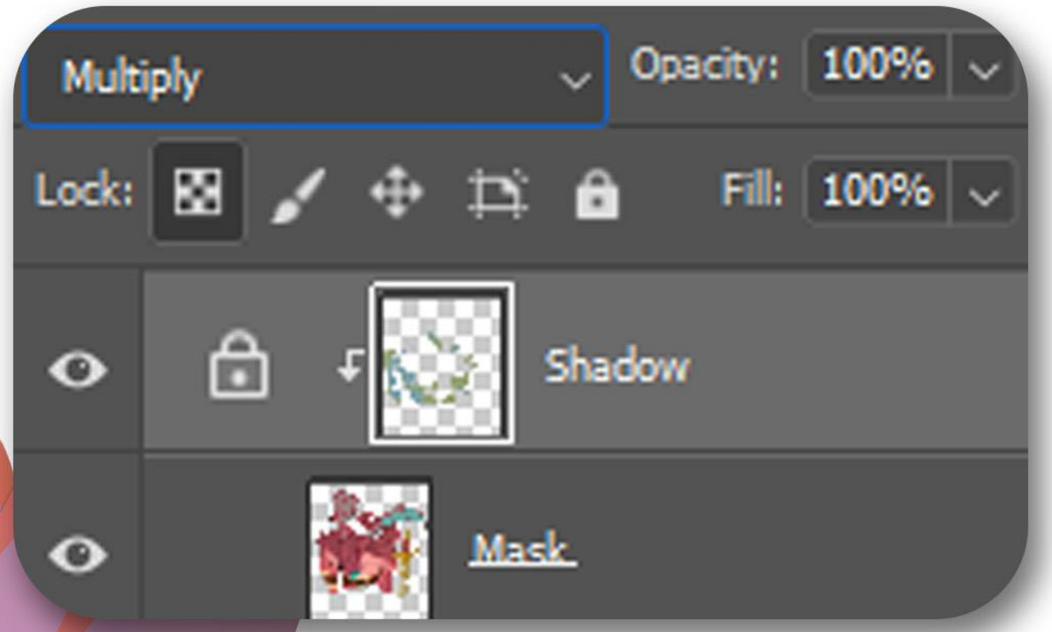
Shadow With ‘Normal Layer’ Mode



When setting up shadows on a separate layer, you can also tint them with different colors. Consider the direction the form is facing: shadows closer to the left are cooler, while shadows closer to the right are warmer.

Shadow With ‘Multiply Layer’ Mode

Final

When rendering to a finish, with the colors laid down as the foundation, you'll end up with a richer and more interesting result.

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Painting Tips (1/3)

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Painting Tips

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Painting Tips (2/3)

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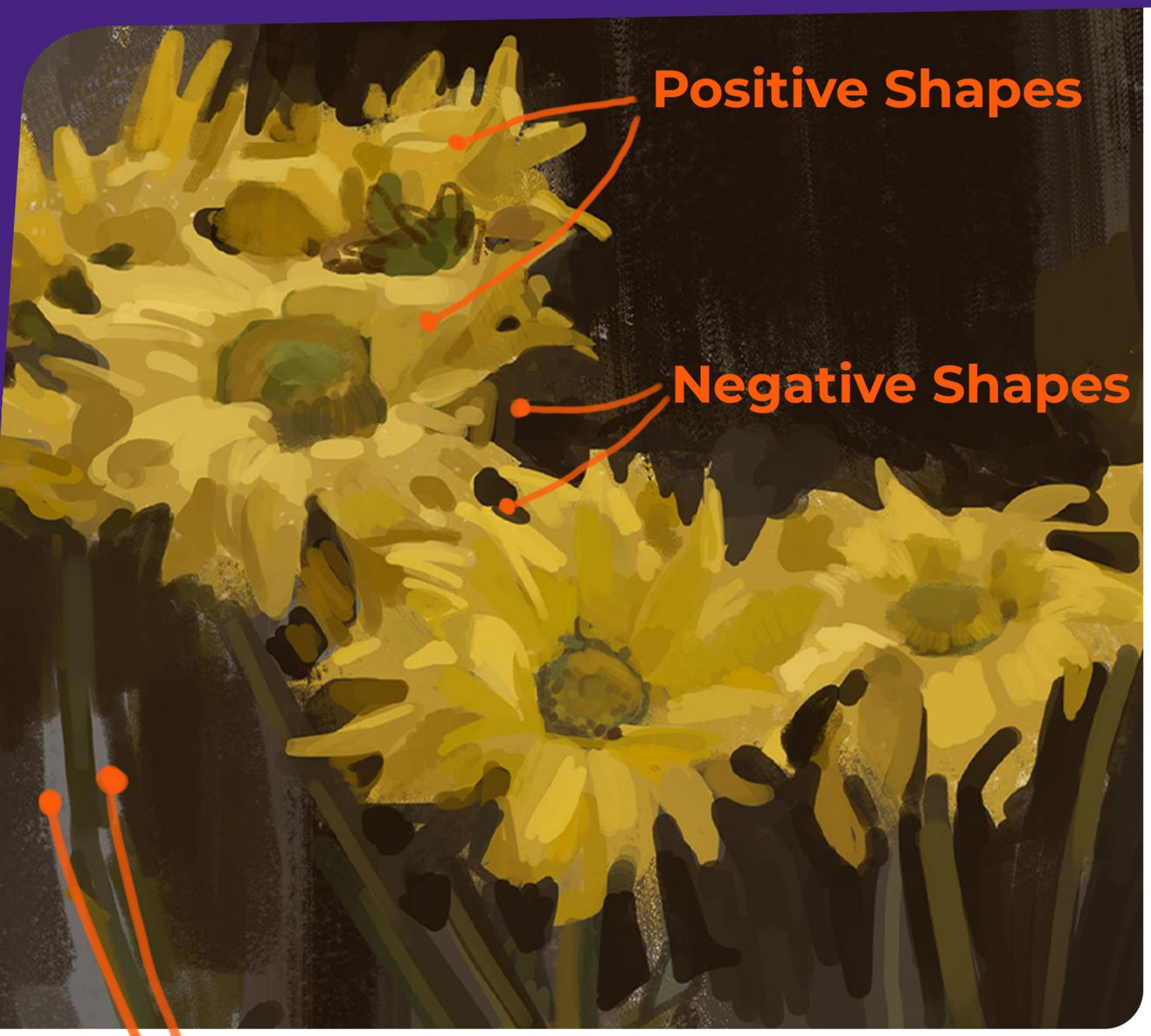

Establish shapes and control their placement through **positive** and **negative** shapes.
This means using the tones of the background to carve into the shapes of the subject.

Good readability can be created quickly through the inter-play between light and dark shapes.

Here, the placement of lighter shapes is enough to indicate the stem of the flower, even though the subject is almost completely merged with the background.

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Painting Tips (3/3)

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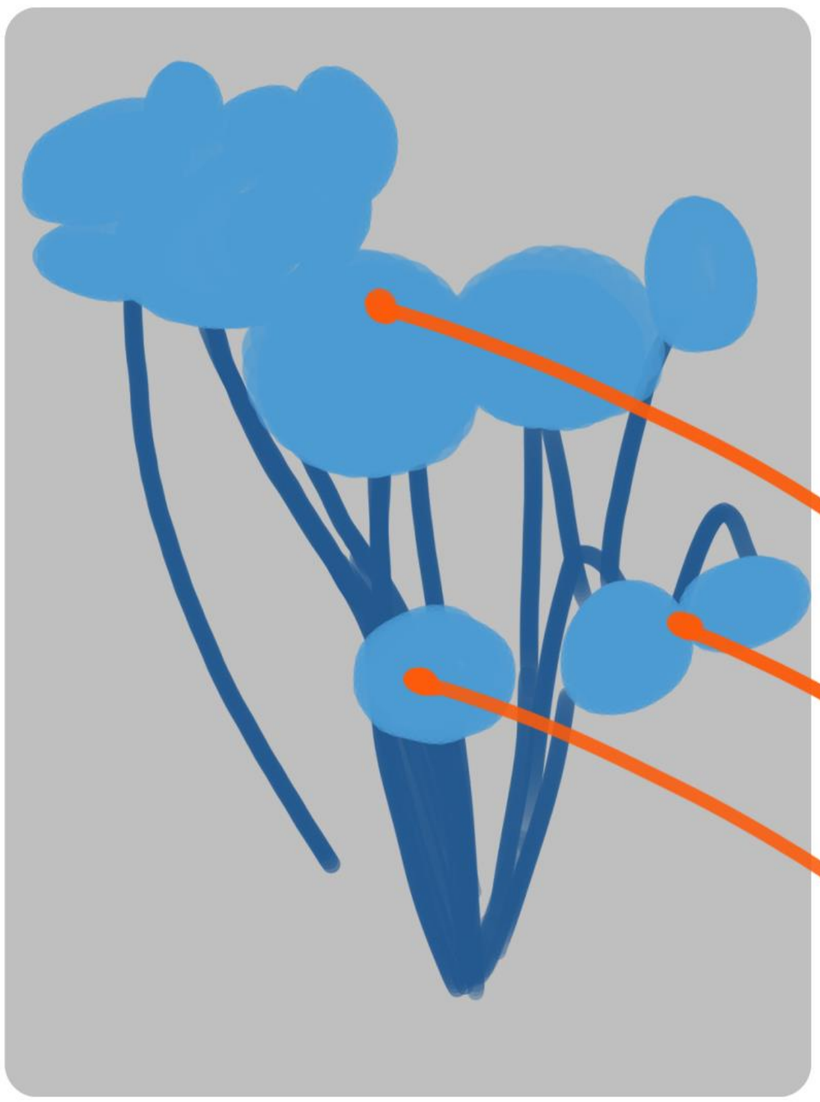
To arrange elements in an interesting manner, aim to avoid evenness.

Visual interest can be encouraged through grouping some elements together, while keeping others separate.
This tends to create subtle contrast.



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Choco & Caramel

Tips on Structure and Painting

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Choco & Caramel (2/4)

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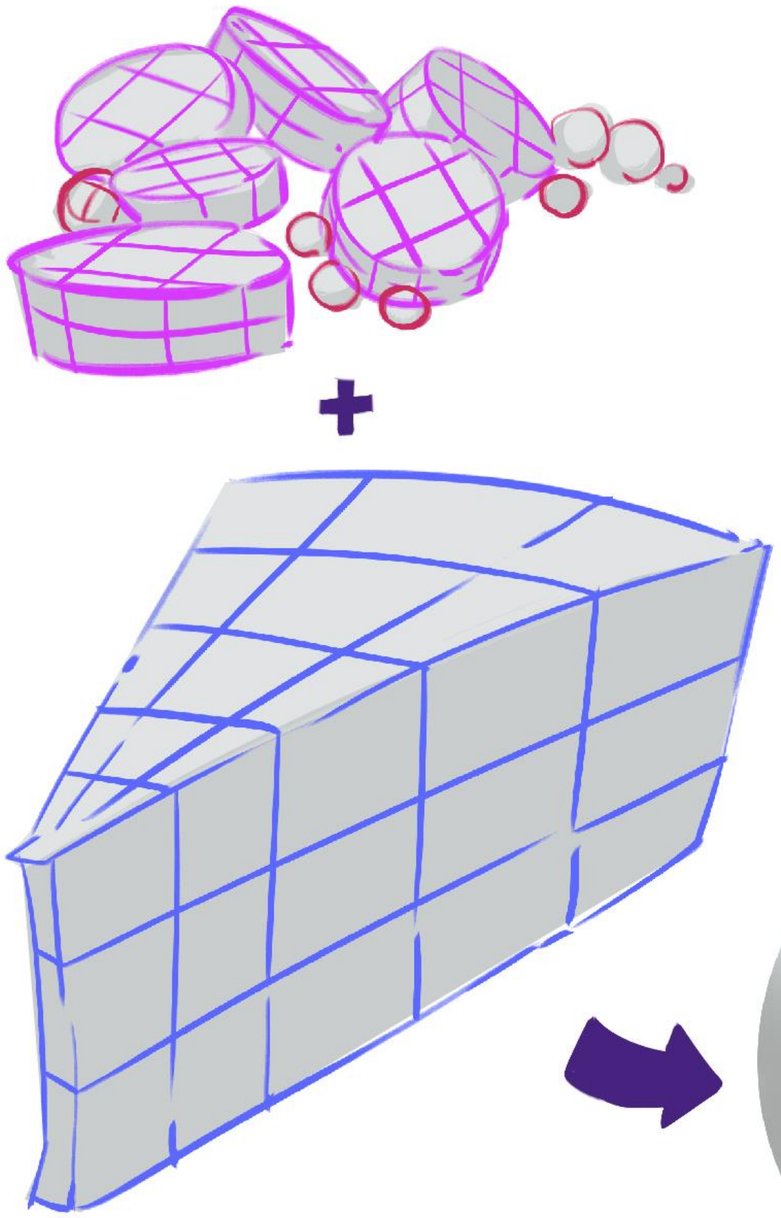
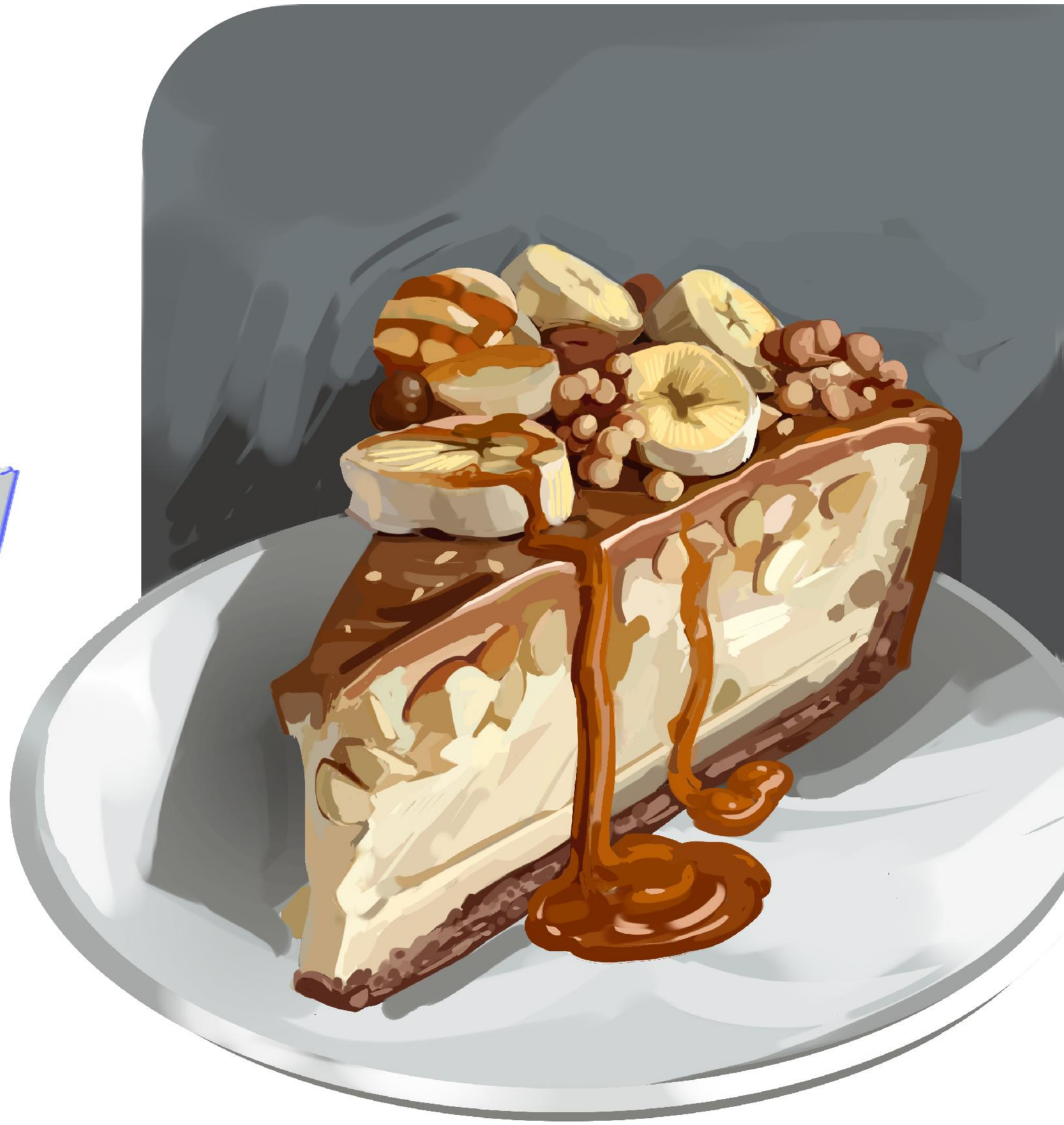
Base Forms





In the first phase, we sketch the form - see the Base Forms used.
If this part is done well, we will have an easy time laying down the base colors.

It is always easier to start with a base structure.

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Choco & Caramel (3/4)

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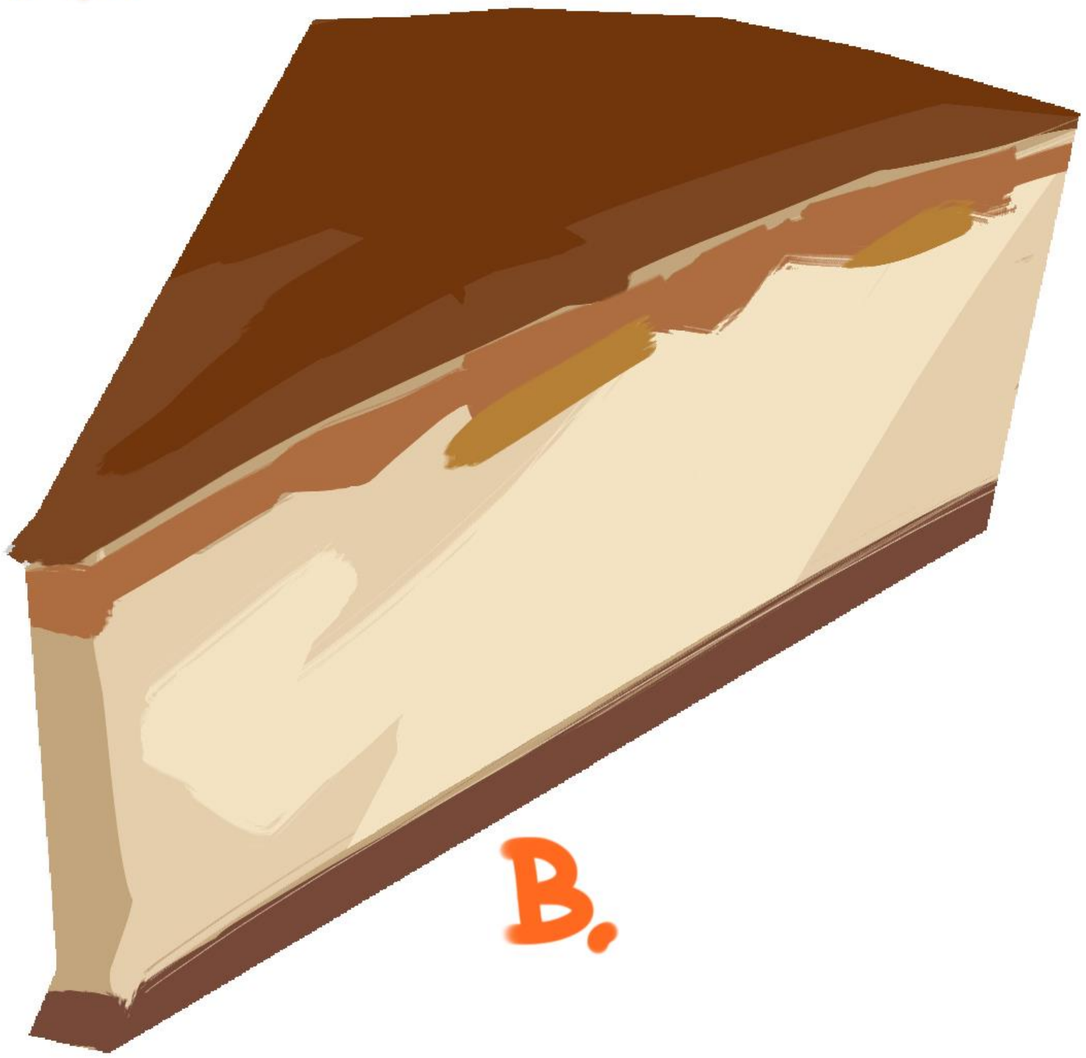

B.

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Separation is useful: splitting your object into 2 components, top and bottom - will make it more manageable.

Base Colors

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Choco & Caramel (4/4)

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Flat Painting Tips

1. Paint zoomed out at first - this way, you will focus on the base range of colors and omit unnecessary details.

2. Paint with Hue Variation, for short you want to paint using variation of the hues found in the local colors we first started with.

3. Try to be precise, if you try to be more precise, you will get a cleaner result.

This seems detailed from far away, but in reality is really loose. We want to be loose, but precise!

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Painting Burgers

Tips on Proportion and Reflection

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Painting Burgers (2/4)

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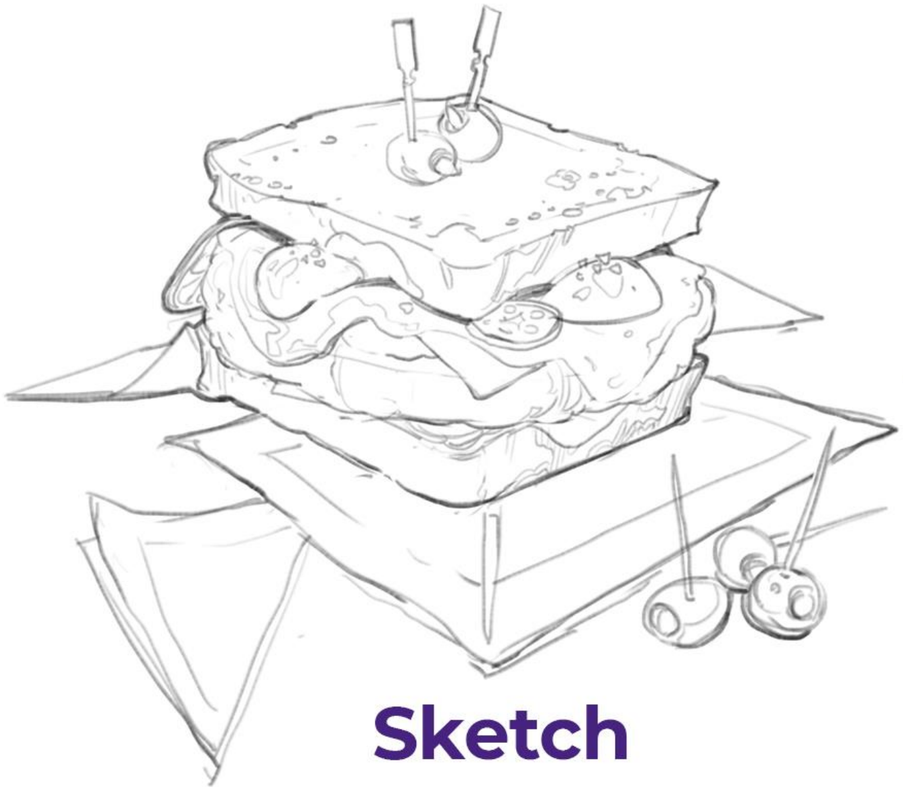
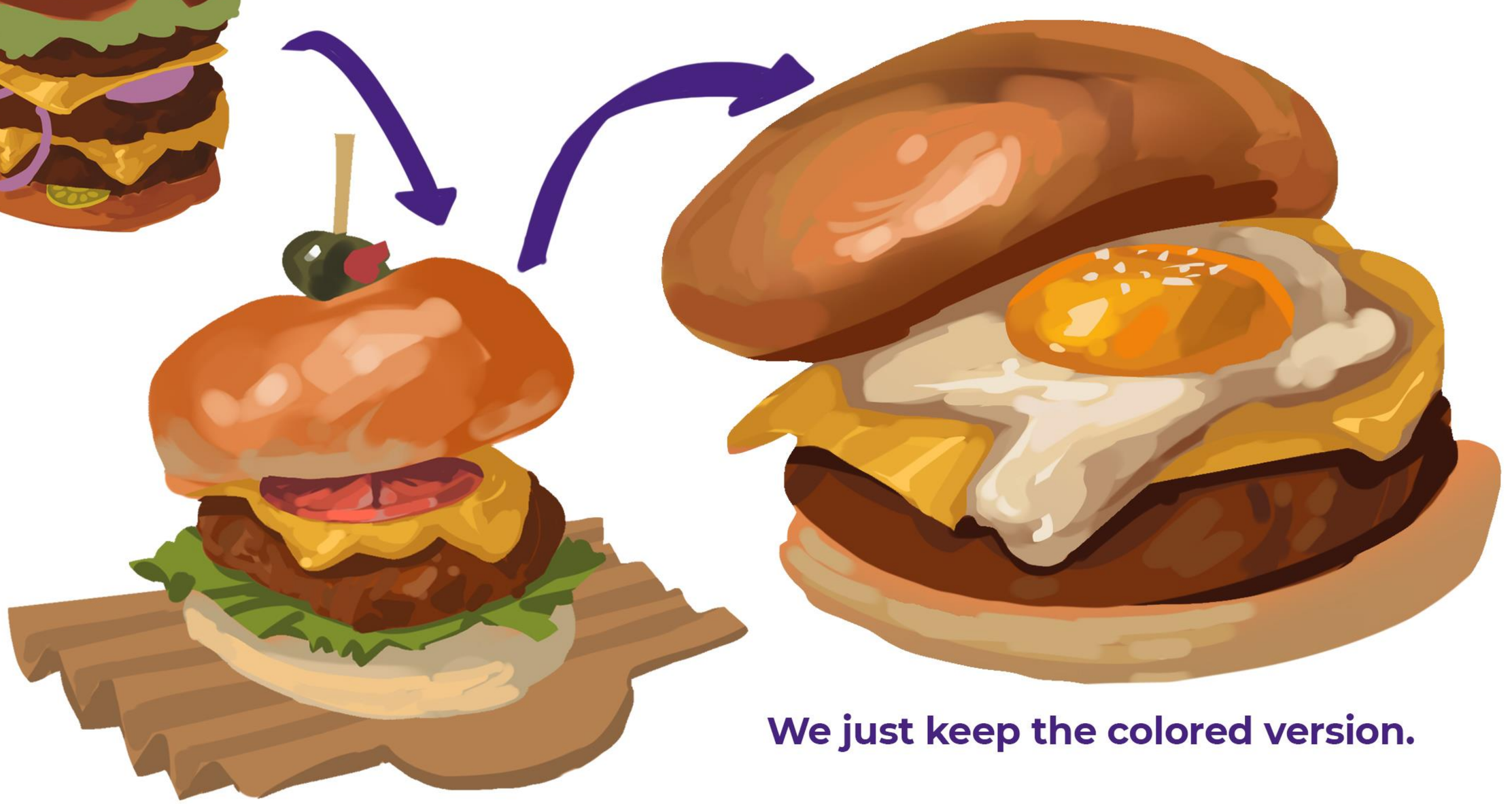
1. Sketch
2. Paint
3. Refine



Sketch

Paint



We just keep the colored version.

Check out Ratios on the next Page

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Painting Burgers (3/4)

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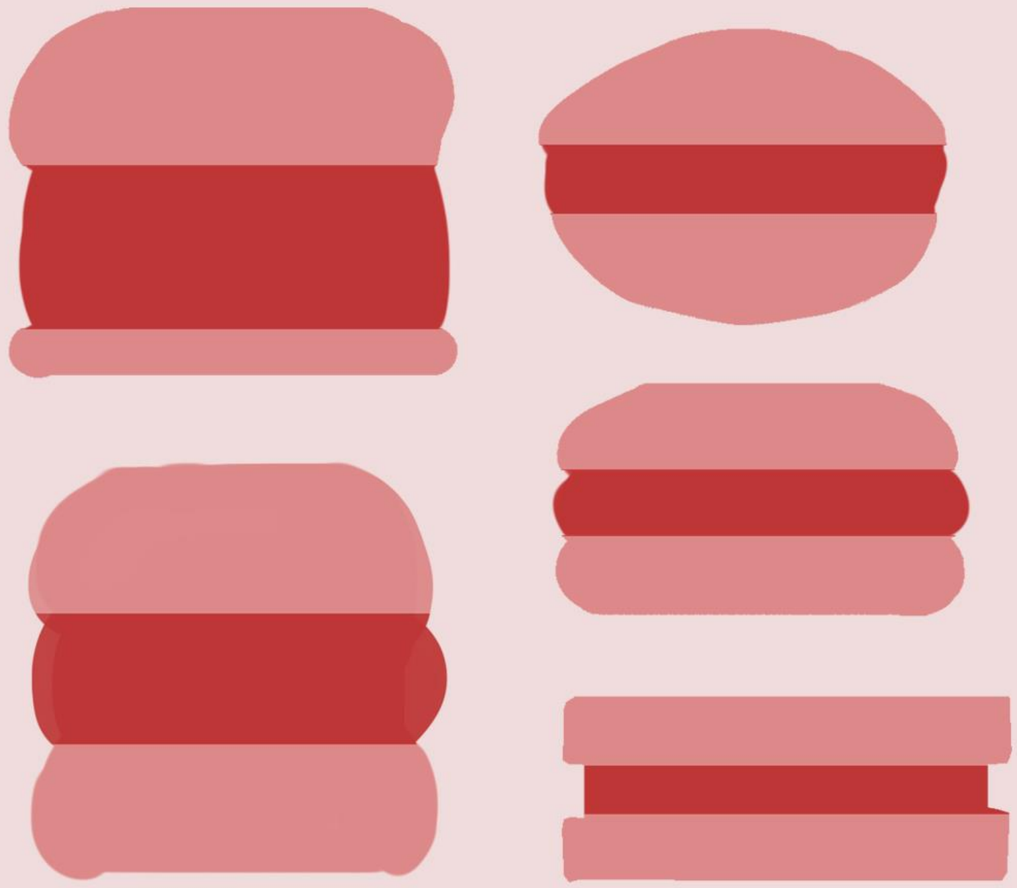
Some things you want to avoid:

1. Same height and width
2. Equal propotions in general
3. Any perfect alignment of any of the represented parts that compose the burger



Try to avoid perfection

Some things you want to consider:

1. Variety in height and width
2. Variety in alignment of various elements
3. Pushing and pulling different components

Try things out and keep an open mind!

Highlights

Always consider lighting to build highlights - highlights contribute to the overall readability of the burger.

Highlights are affected by the form and glossiness of materials.

Have fun painting!

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Digital Plein Air Painting (1/4)

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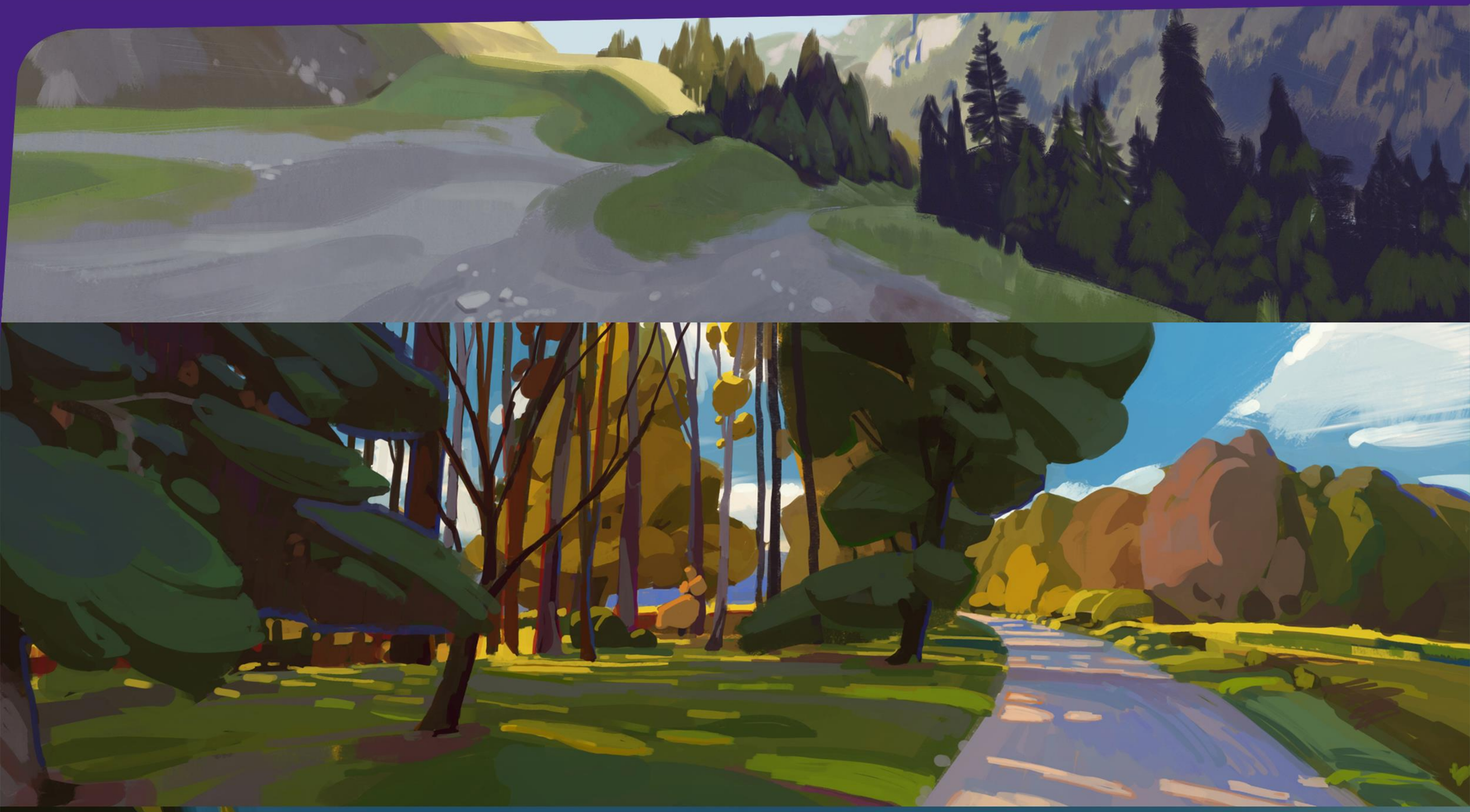

Digital Plein Air Painting

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Digital Plein Air Painting (2/4)

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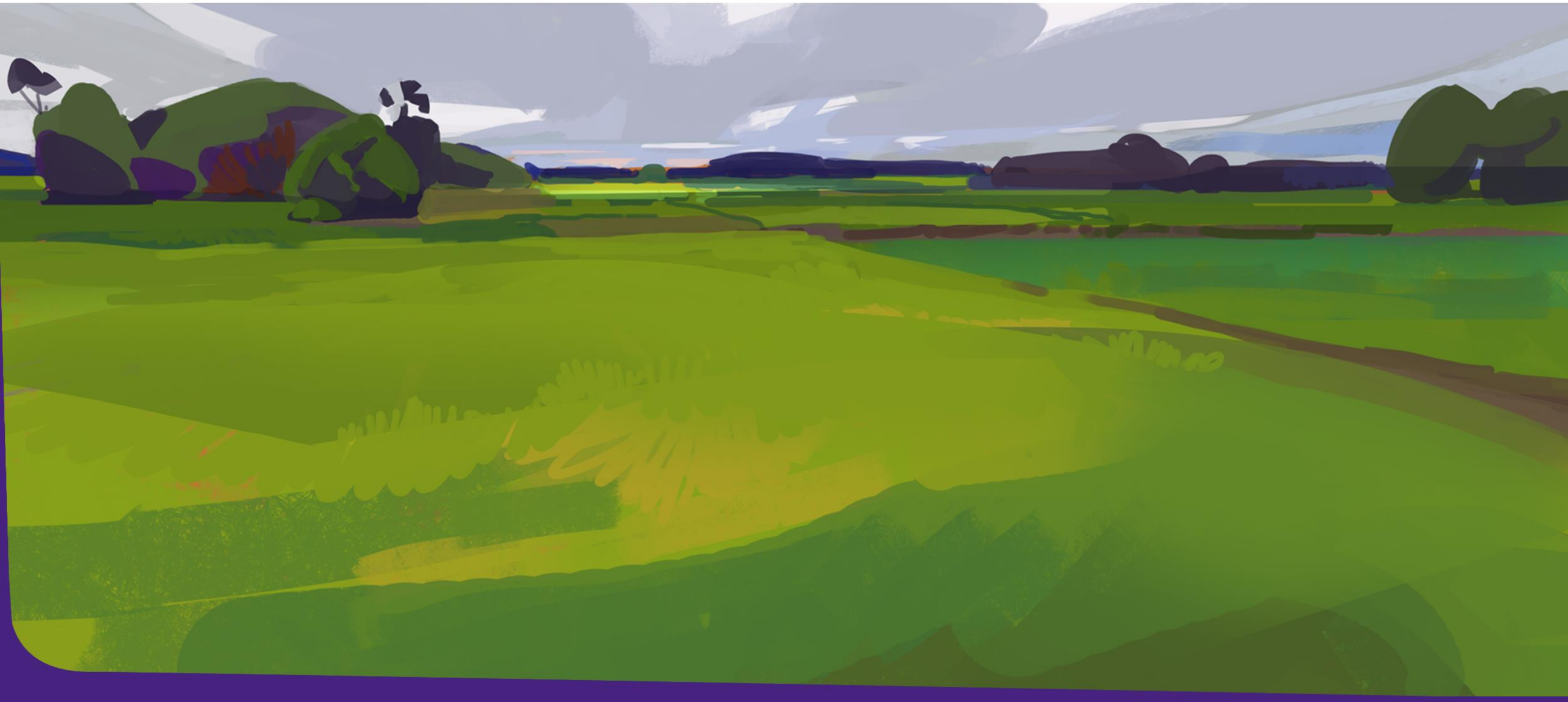
Digital plein air studies are similar to on-site paintings. They help us practice our understanding of the fundamentals, while also building our visual library for spaces, color, and light.

In addition, we can practice our abilities to depict scenes and environments in natural lighting.

Screenshot from Google Street View



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Digital Plein Air Painting (3/4)

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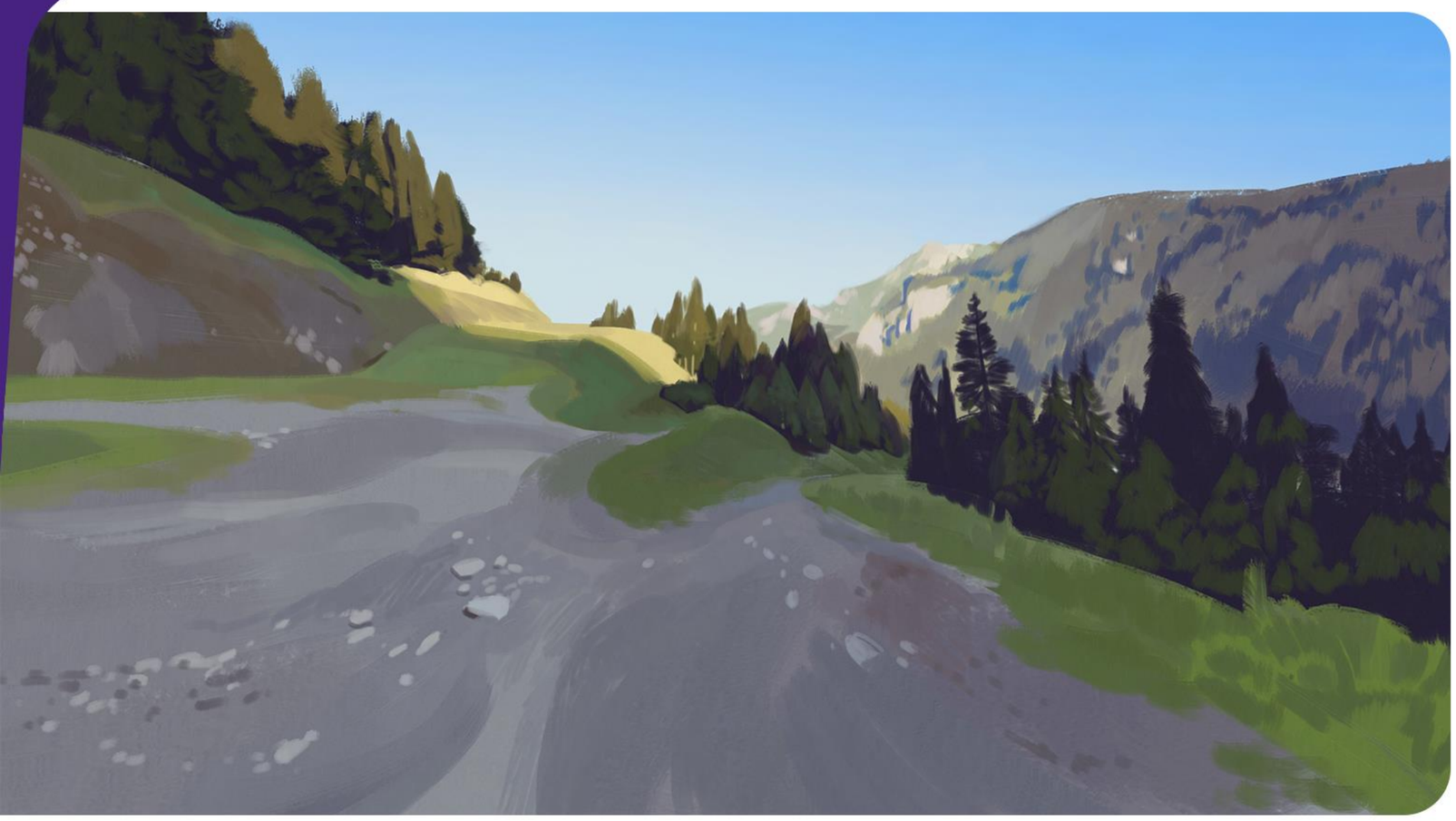


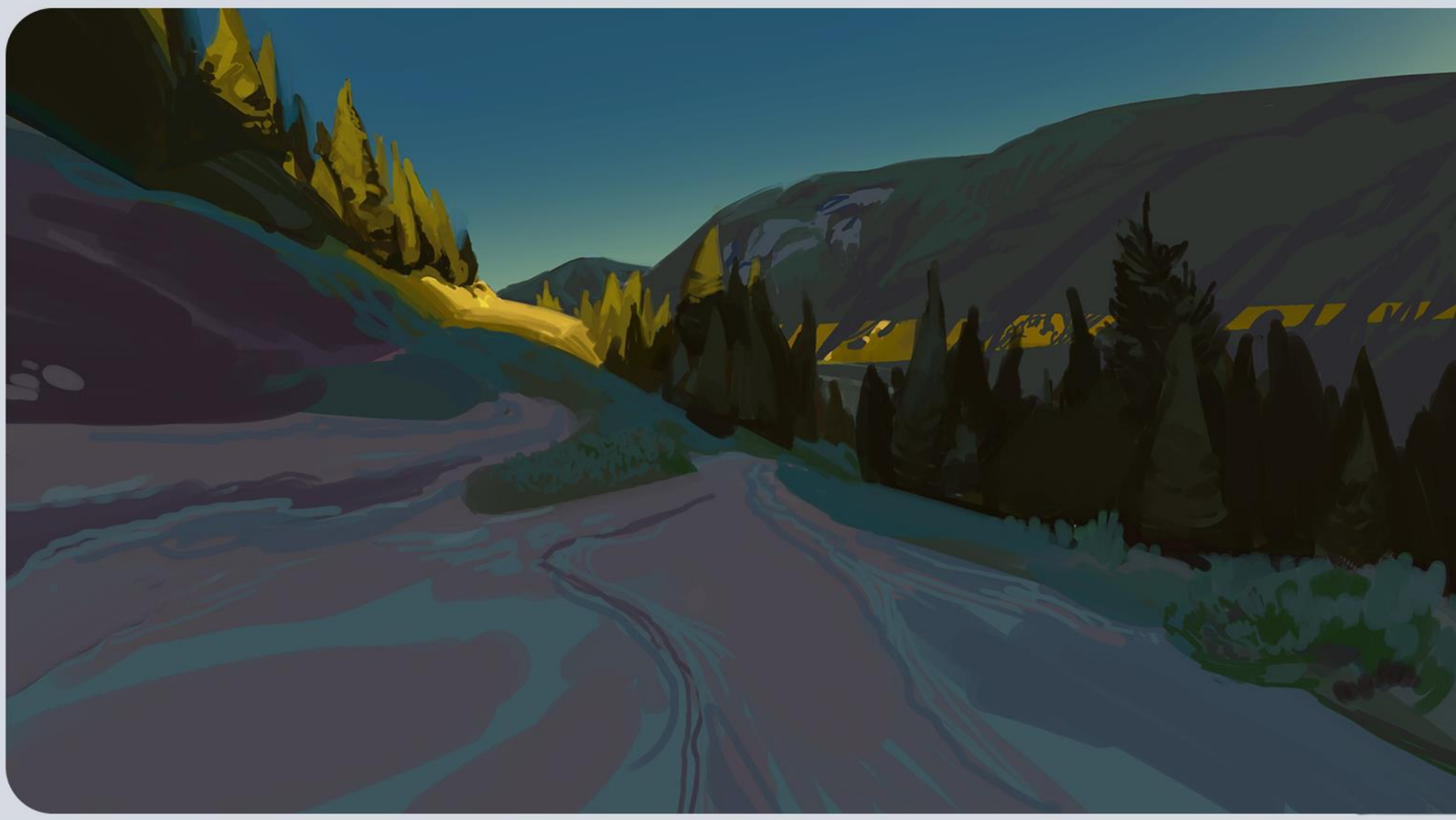
One to one study

Reference

We can also give the exercise a spin and invent parts of it.

While keeping the structure and composition the same, elements such as light and color can change and vice versa.

This helps train us to interpret rather than simply copy.



Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Digital Plein Air Painting (4/4)

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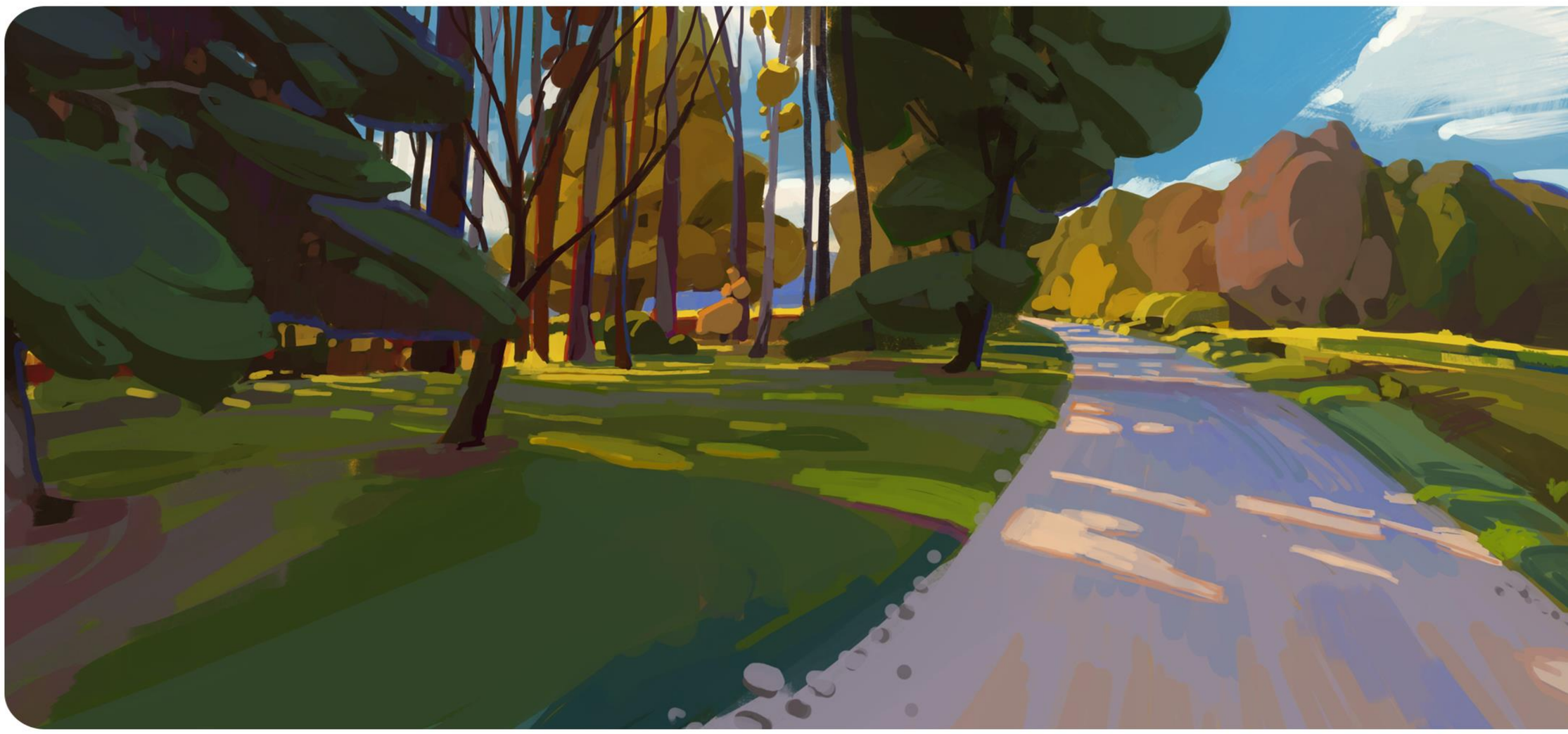
The benefit of using **Street View** and similar sources is that we can explore and move around to find suitable scenes to paint. On-site painting is still preferable, but not always possible.

Tip: **mapcrunch.com** finds random places on Google Streetview for us.



This exercise also serves as a base for experiments. The scene and subject are given, so we can explore different styles or workflows.

Want to see the process? Check out this video

Want to learn more?

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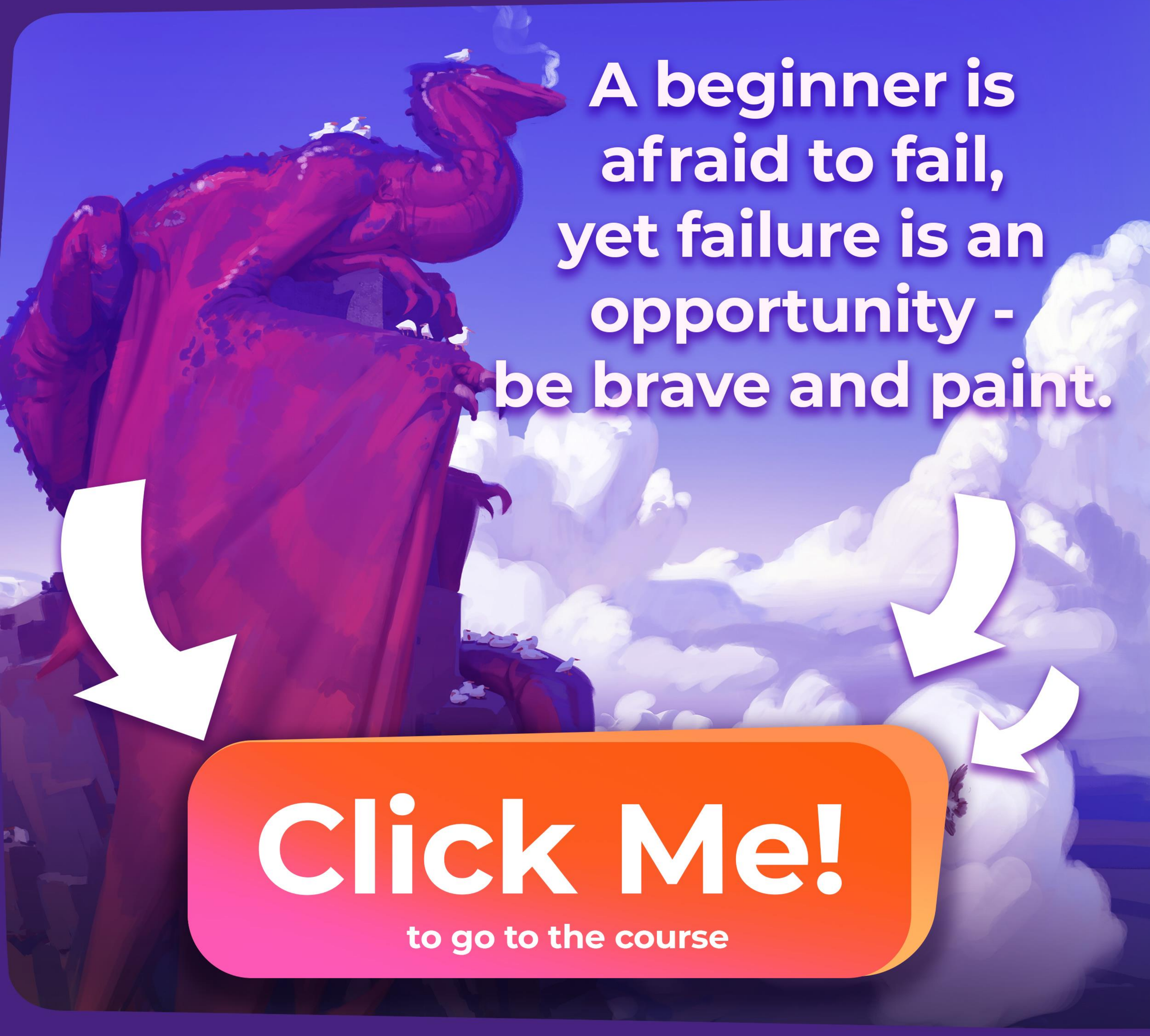
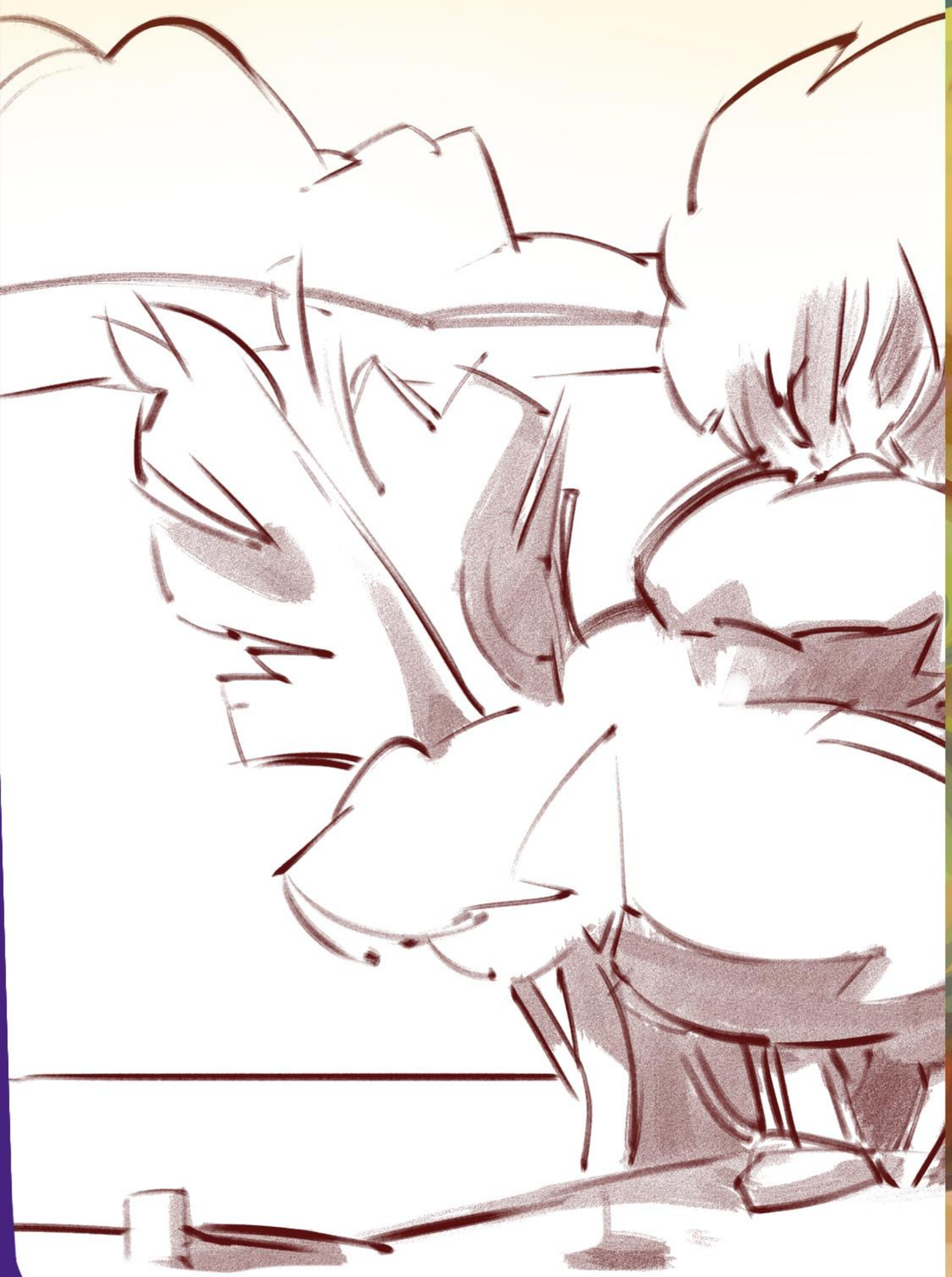
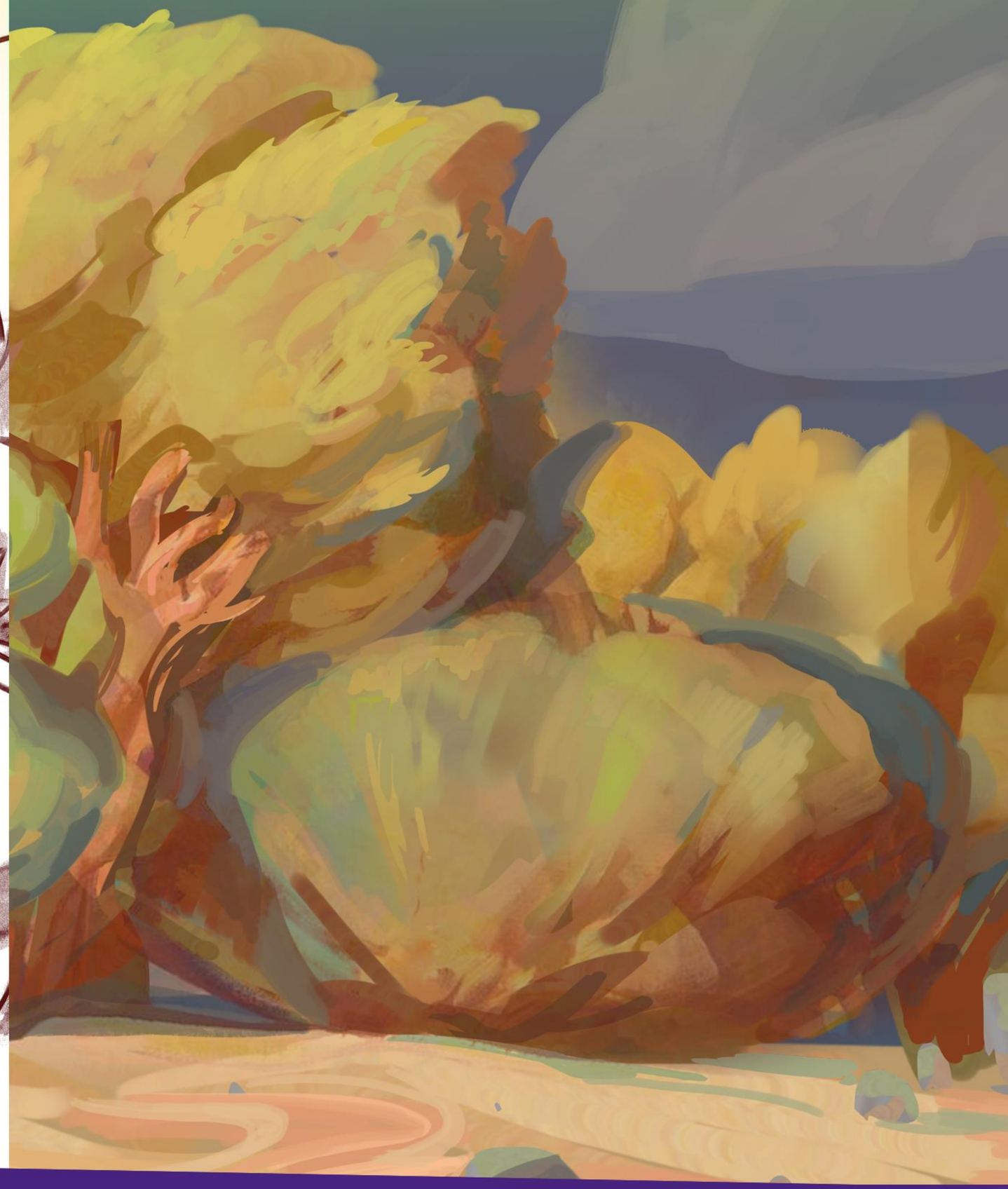


From Sketch to Painting Using Reference





Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Sketch to Painting using Reference (2/4)

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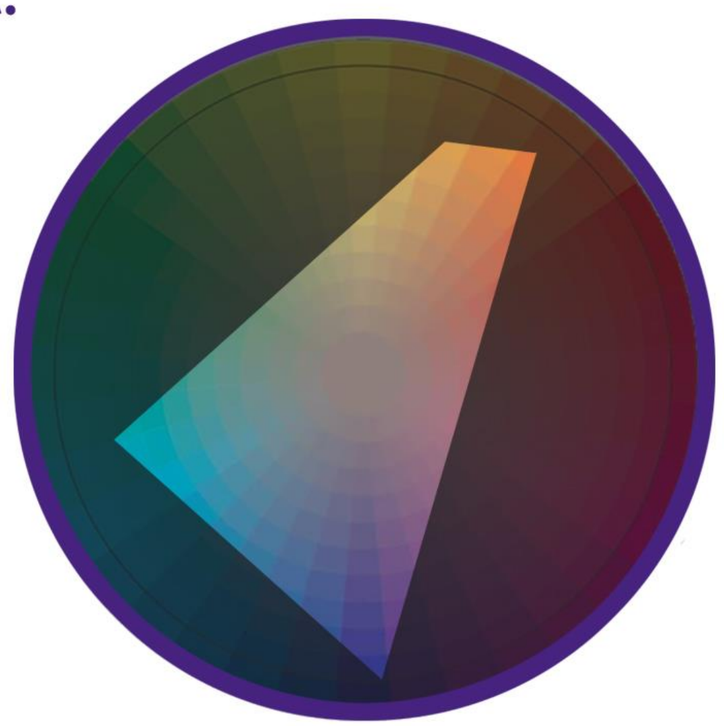
The Artist we chose is Brett Allen Johnson.

Brett has a really cool color palette, and a great way to simplify shapes. So our takeaway focus is :

1. Shapes
2. Color
3. Simplification

The way we want to apply this is doing something simple using Gamut. We choose the main colors, apply value and get to a close result.



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Sketch to Painting using Reference (3/4)

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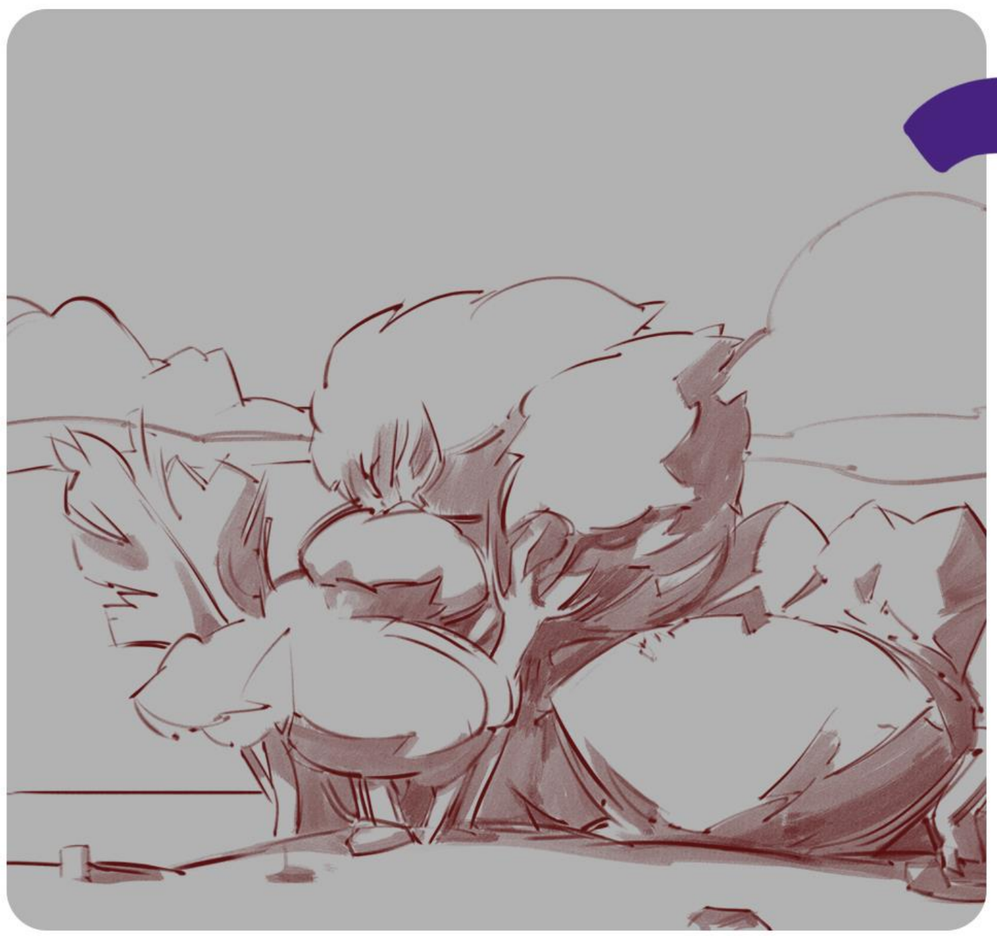
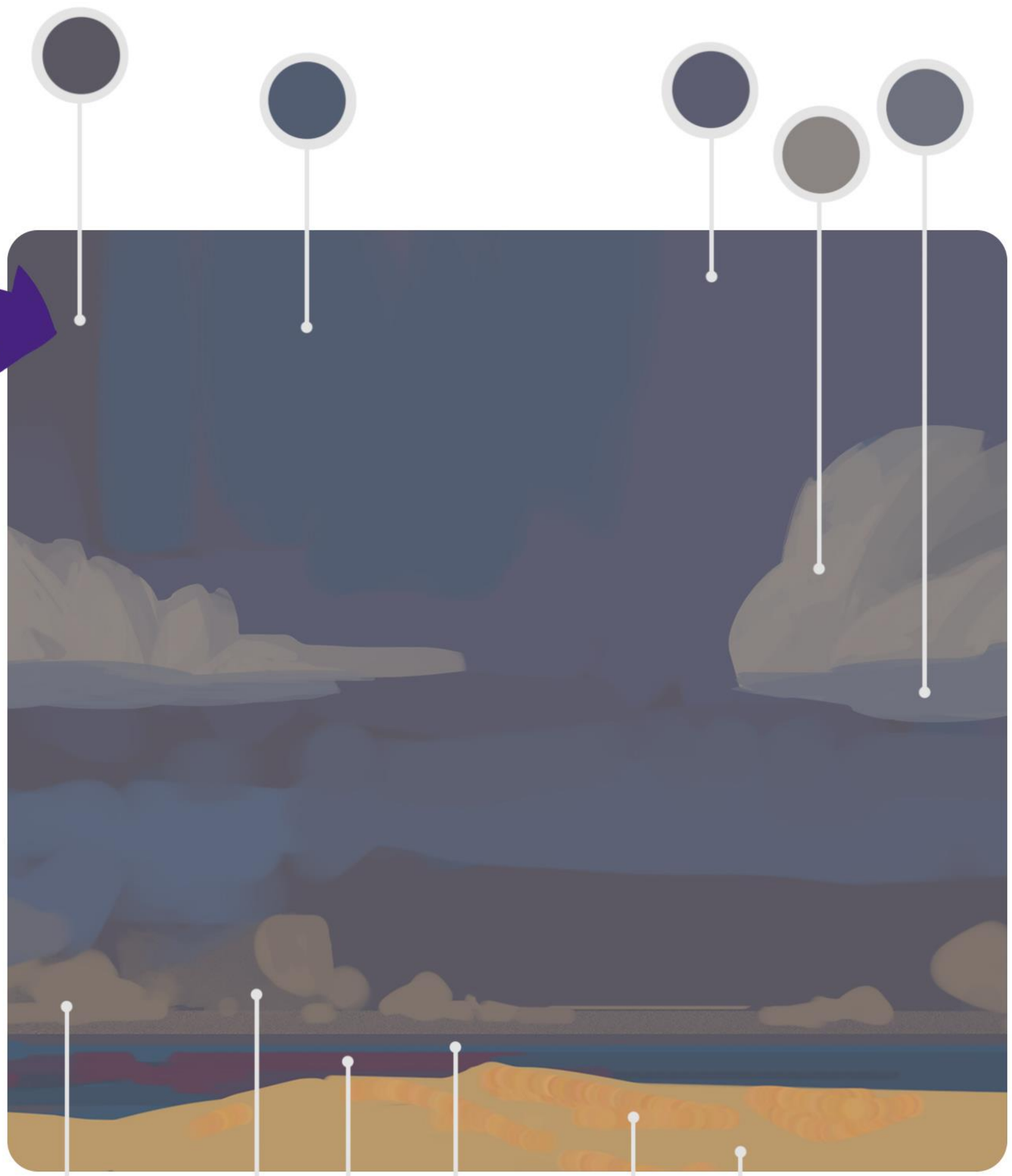
For sketching, you can use a warm color. This is not mandatory, it's just a suggestion.





We make the sketch - keeping simplification in mind - our general shapes - we try to keep them as simple as possible.

We use the Gamut to analyse the artist's color palette.

Brightness goes to a max of 50% and Saturation is kept around 20-25%. These are averages.

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Sketch to Painting using Reference (4/4)

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In the process, we don't try to reproduce everything. We try to understand the decisions that were made.

That is why we use Gamut to analyse the color palette, we build the background and then continue working on the sketch we made to paint the larger picture.

Other tips to keep in mind:

1. Paint with flats in the beginning - this way you keep the shapes clear.
2. Simplify - don't overdo, just keep the readability between light and shadow.
3. Use color dynamics with the following settings:
   Hue Jitter 5% Saturation Jitter 5% Brightness Jitter 2% Purity 0%

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How to Render: Forms (1/3)

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Rendering Form

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How to Render: Forms (2/3)

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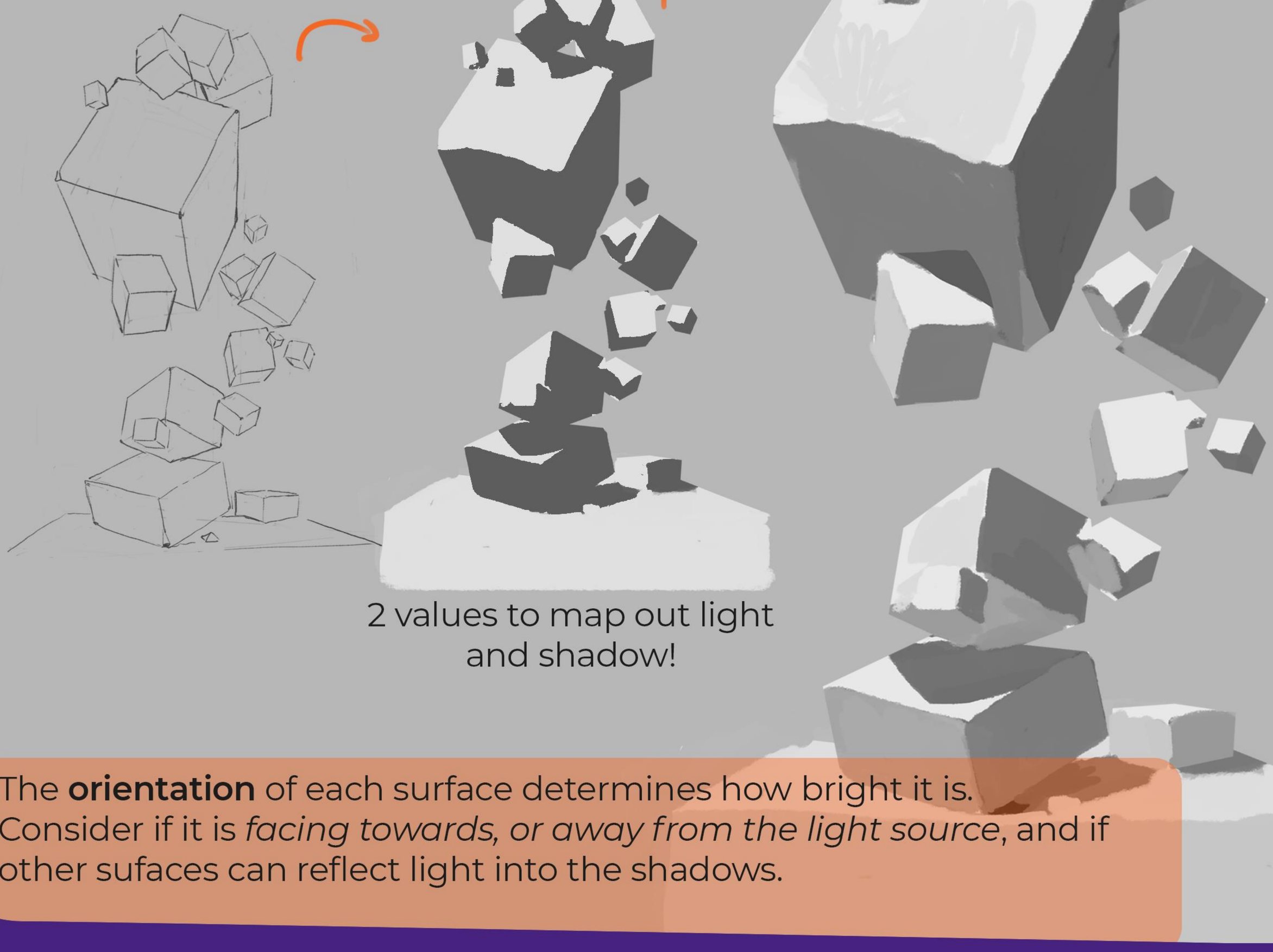
Construct the subject using lines to get **perspective** and **form** right.
A strong foundation leads to a higher chance of success!



2 values to map out light and shadow!

The **orientation** of each surface determines how bright it is.
Consider if it is *facing towards, or away from the light source*, and if other sufaces can reflect light into the shadows.

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How to Render: Forms (3/3)

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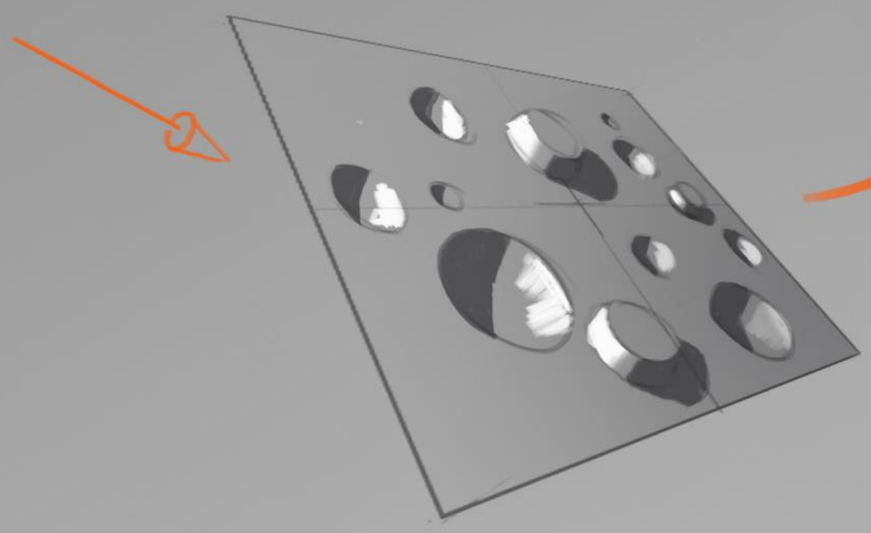
The established **value structure** serves as a guide for any form changes, as well as texture information.

Texture becomes most prominent in the **halftones** - light and shadow create most of the contrast and detail here.



Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Painting a Dress (1/3)

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Painting a Dress

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Painting a Dress (2/3)

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A **line sketch** serves as a foundation. The more challenges solved here, the easier the painting process.

Local colors with no light or shadow information. Imagine the subject under neutral diffuse light.

Lighting is revealed the moment the **shadow shapes are painted**.

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Painting a Dress (3/3)

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A **light and shadow version of a color** can be enough to create a convincing lighting effect on a sketch.

The value difference depends on the **lighting situation of the scene.**

A helpful rule of thumb is placing the shadow value **half-way between the light value and black.**

How to paint Leather Boots

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

How to Paint Leather Boots (2/4)

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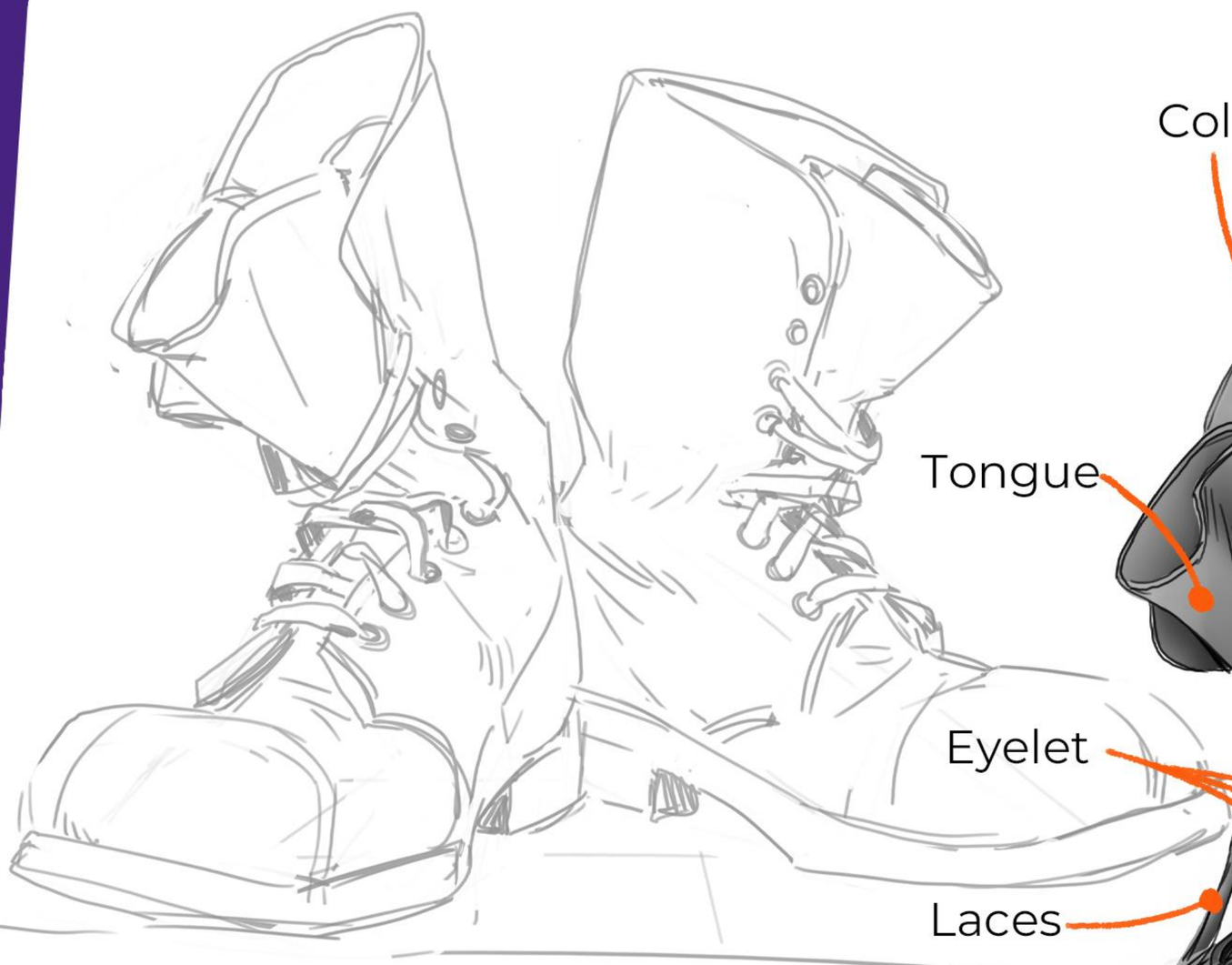

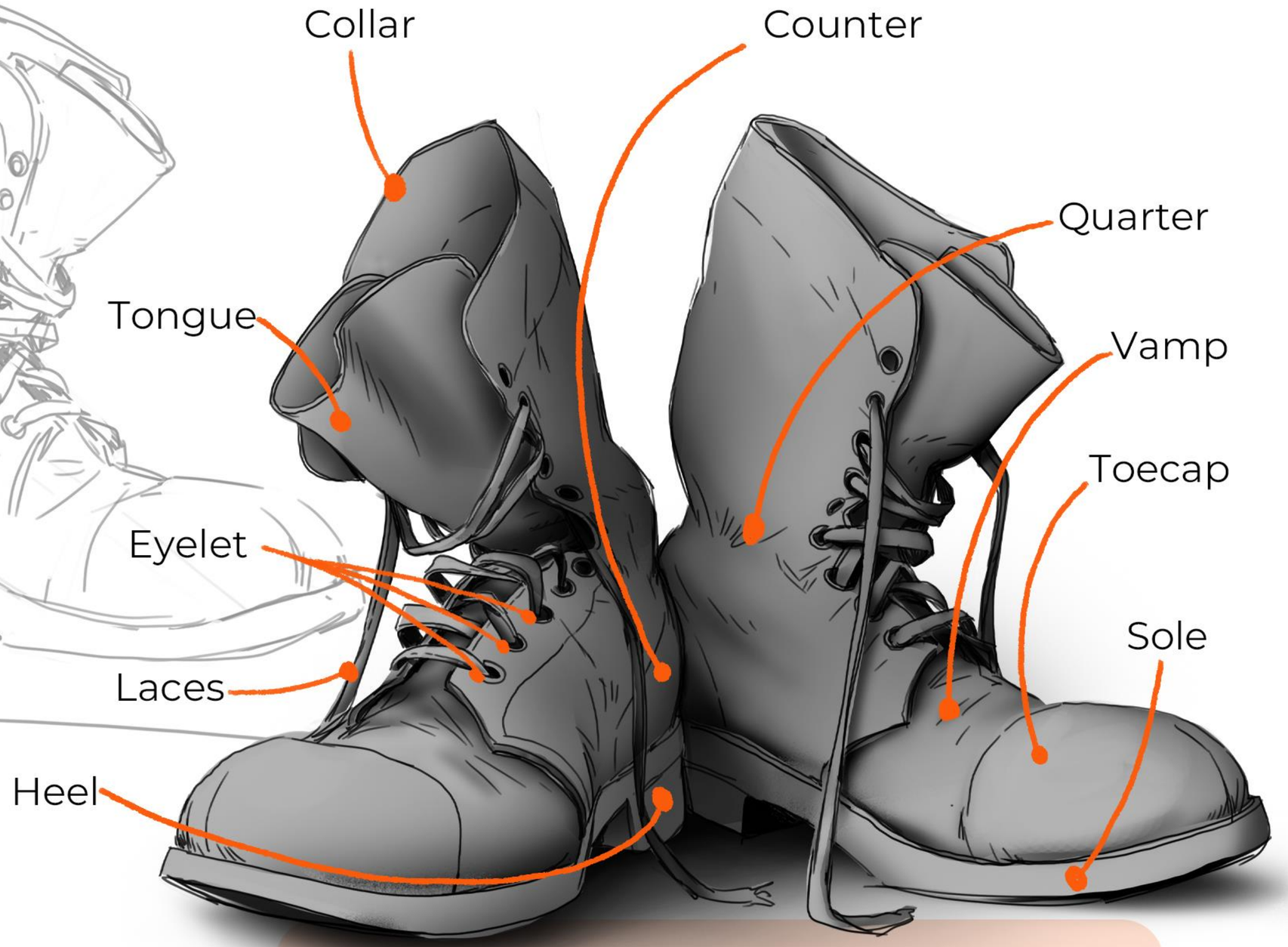

Use the **sketch** to determine design, form, placement of elements, etc.

Focus on **meaningful overlap** to indicate form and depth.

Use **references** to inform design and details!

Clean lines clarify details and reduce visual uncertainty.
Focus on lines that communicate **form and structure**.

Pay attention to what makes a boot a boot!

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

How to Paint Leather Boots (3/4)

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Keep **shadows** on a separate layer. This allows for quick changes without repainting other parts of the boot.

Cast Shadows
Occlusion Shadows
Leather is often stained.
Areas of wear and tear reveal the lighter color of its **natural fibers** underneath.
Form Shadows

Local colors indicate material properties, such as the stain on leather, or weathering and wear & tear.

Add wear & tear where the boot is most exposed to damage, such as around the edges, the toebox, the sole, etc.

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How to Paint Leather Boots (4/4)

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Specular highlights reveal the **material qualities** of the leather.
Depending on the level of polish, the highlights can be clear or diffuse.

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Painting Highlights

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Painting Highlights (2/3)

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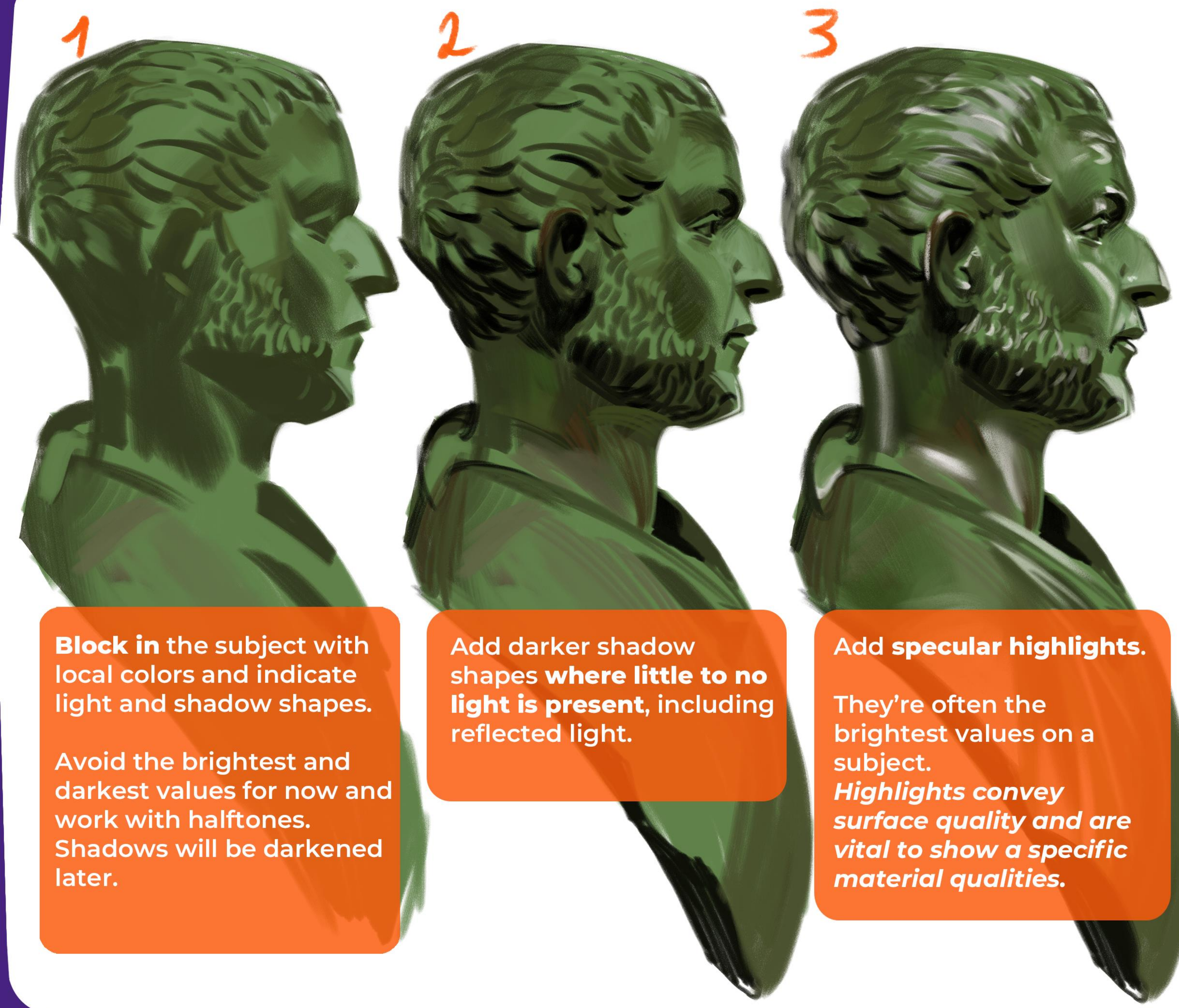

Block in the subject with local colors and indicate light and shadow shapes.

Avoid the brightest and darkest values for now and work with halftones. Shadows will be darkened later.

Add darker shadow shapes **where little to no light is present**, including reflected light.

Add **specular highlights.**

They’re often the brightest values on a subject.
Highlights convey surface quality and are vital to show a specific material qualities.

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Painting Highlights (3/3)

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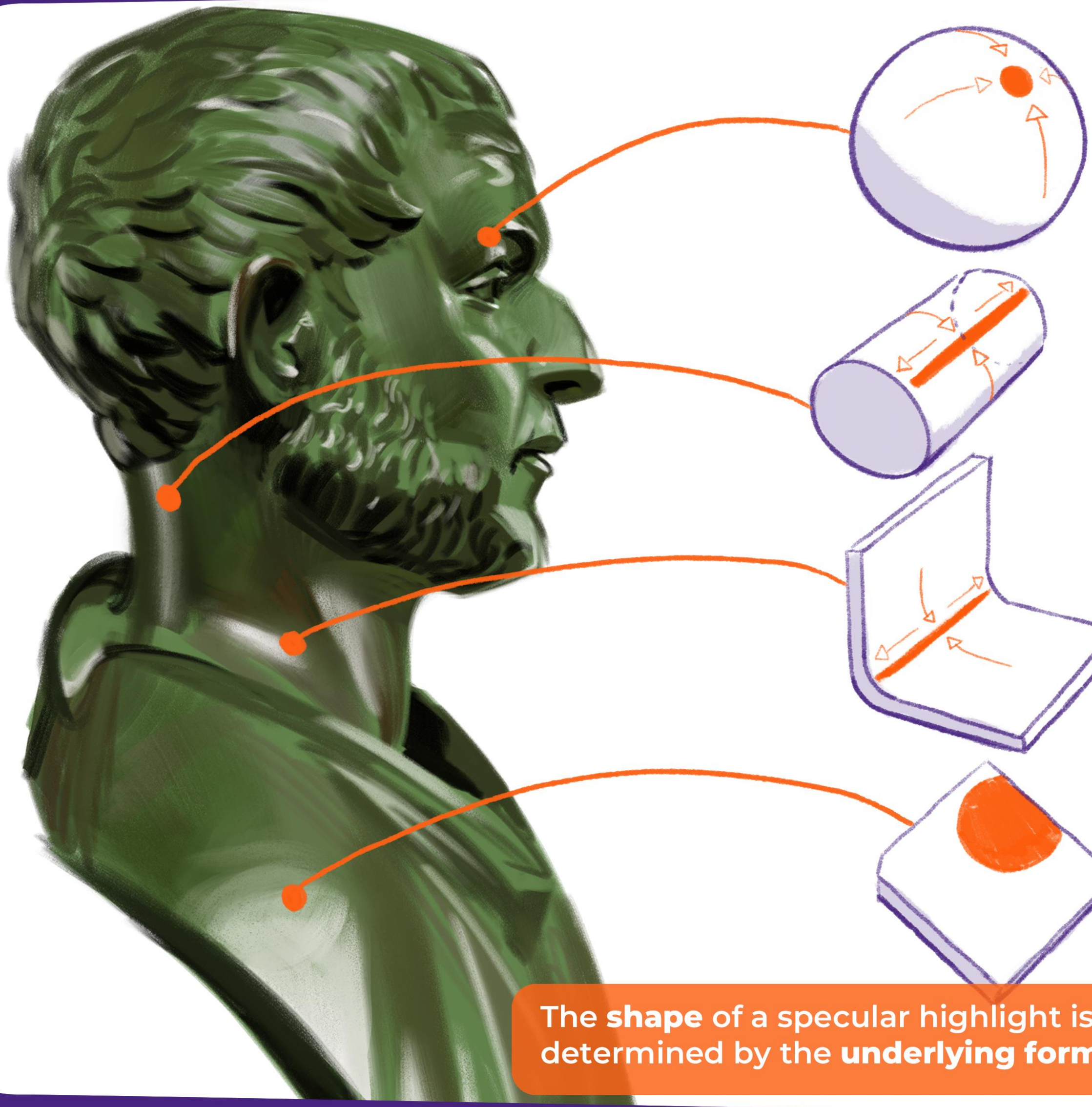

The **shape** of a specular highlight is determined by the **underlying form**.

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Painting Faces (1/4)

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Painting Faces

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Painting Faces (2/4)

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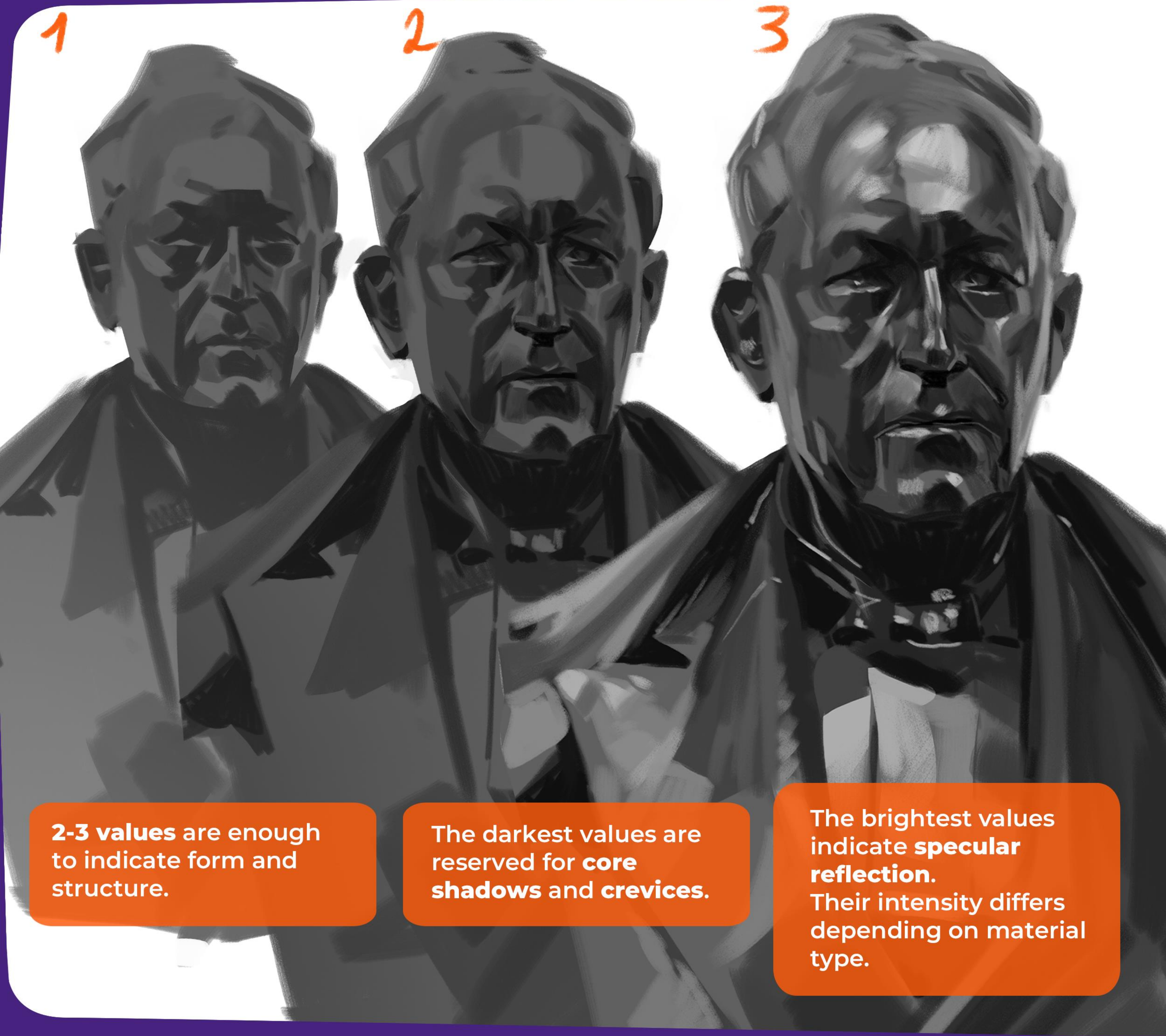

2-3 values are enough to indicate form and structure.

The darkest values are reserved for **core shadows** and **crevices**.

The brightest values indicate **specular reflection**.
Their intensity differs depending on material type.

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Painting Faces (3/4)

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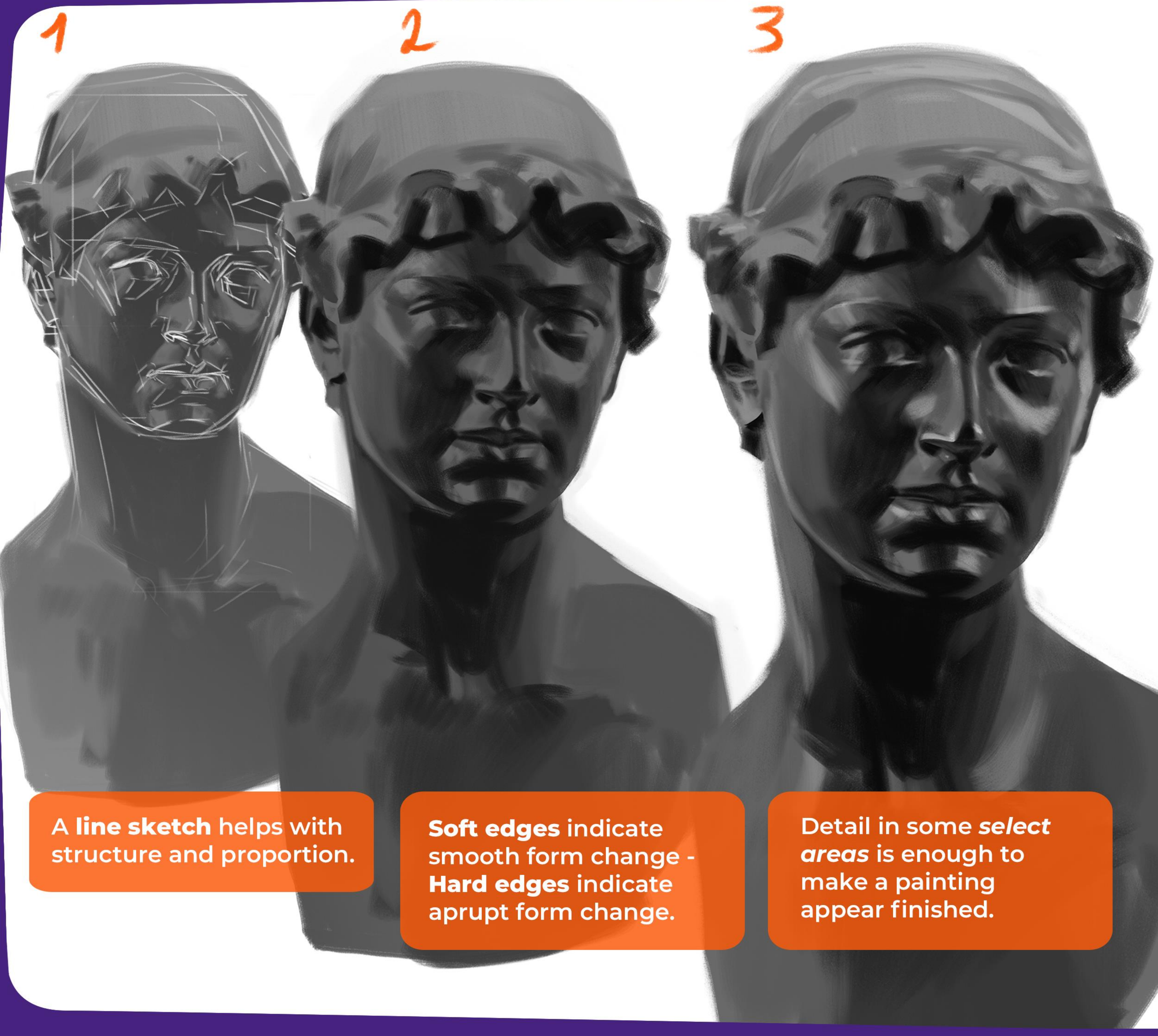

A **line sketch** helps with structure and proportion.

Soft edges indicate smooth form change - **Hard edges** indicate aprupt form change.

Detail in some ***select areas*** is enough to make a painting appear finished.

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Painting Faces (4/4)

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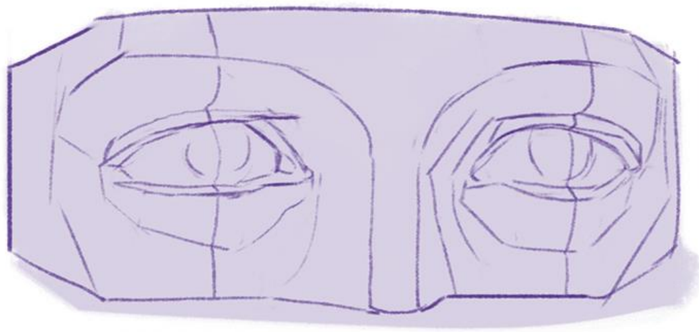
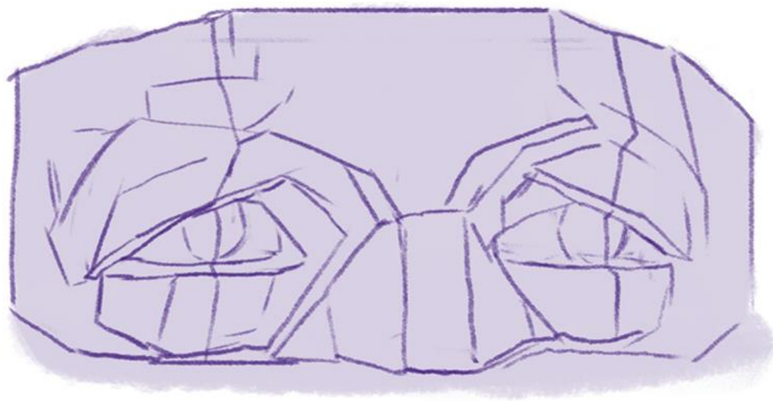


Mostly aprupt form changes & more skin detail = **Aging**

Mostly smooth form changes & less skin detail = **Youthful**



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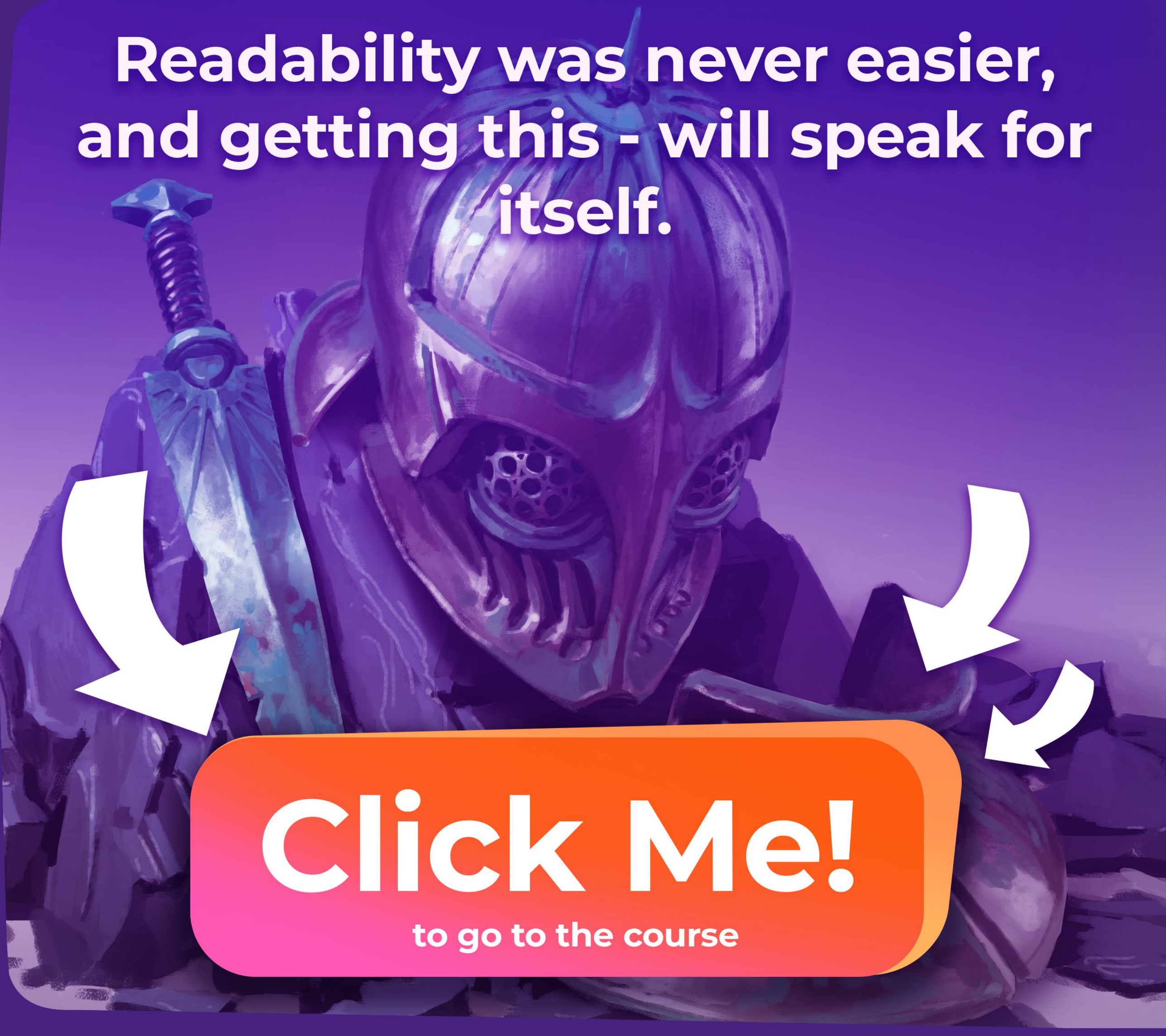
Readability was never easier, and getting this - will speak for itself.



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Reflections (1/3)

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Reflections

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Reflections (2/3)

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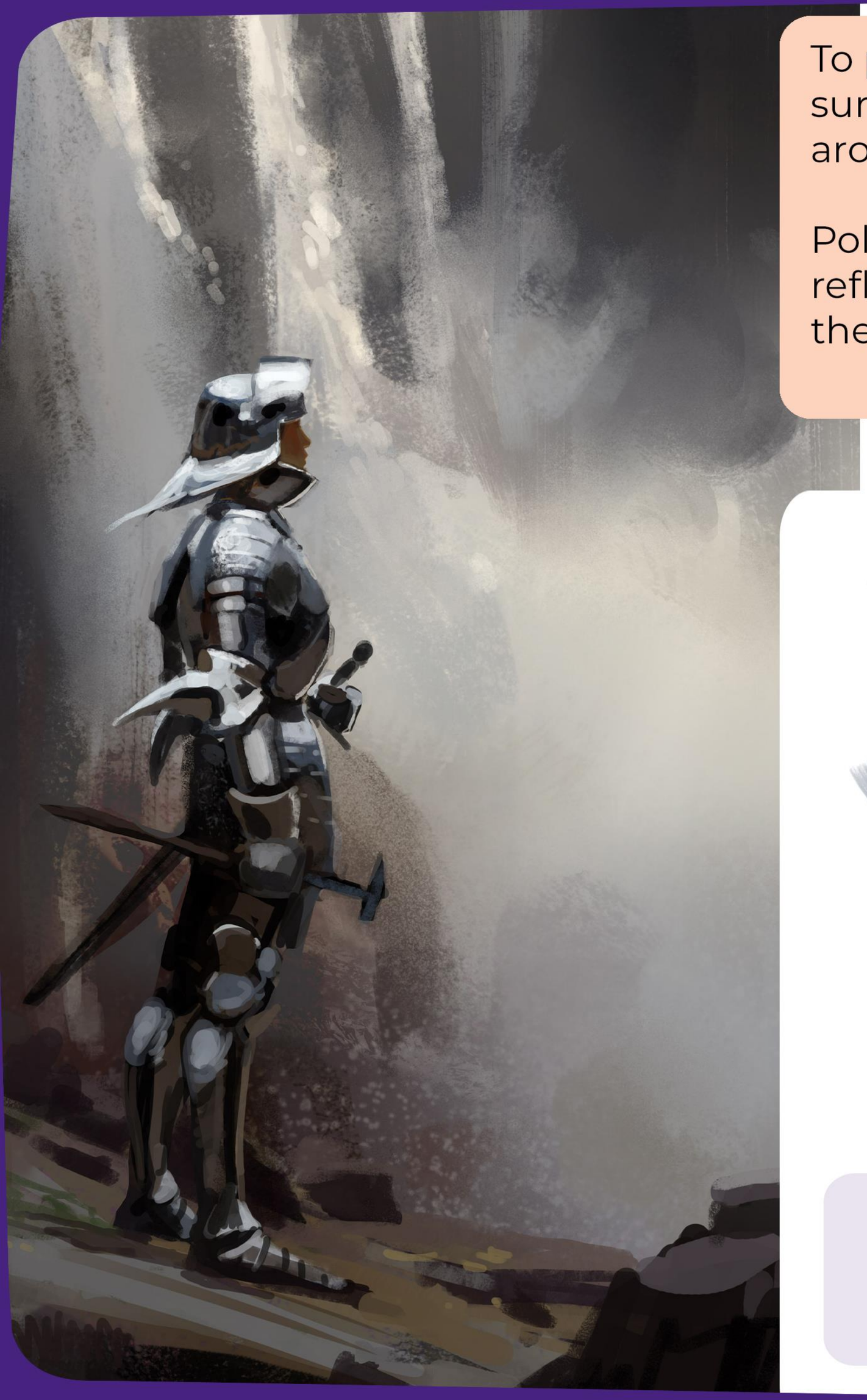
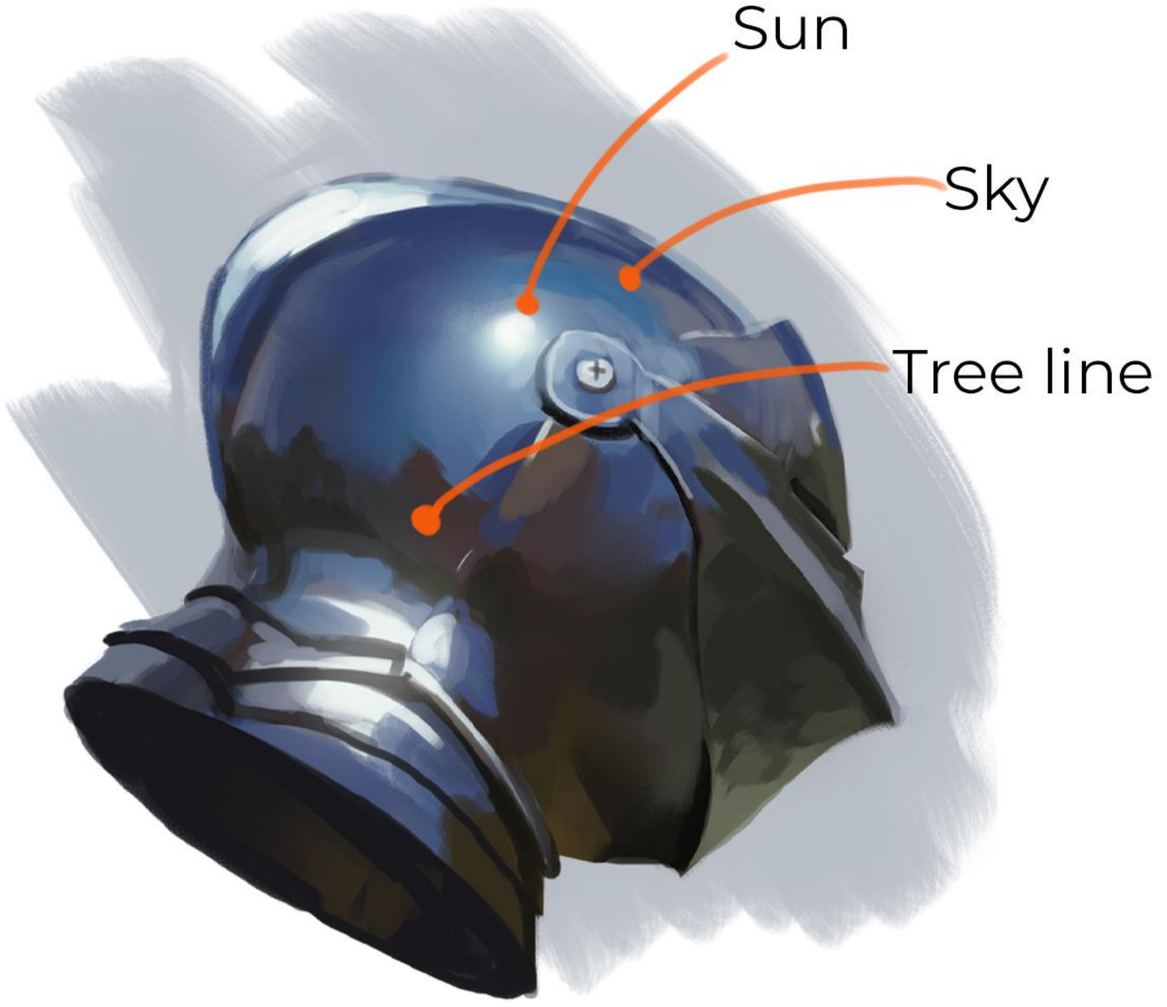


To paint **believable** reflective surfaces, consider the environment around it!

Polished metal acts as a **mirror** and reflects the colors and values from the surrounding scene.



The reflection will be **distorted** depending on the **form** of the metallic object.

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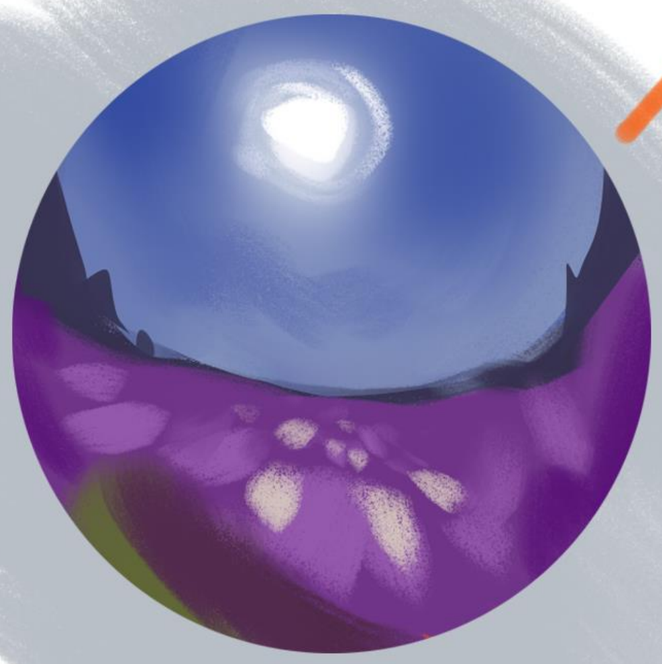
Reflections (3/3)

Convincing metal surfaces do not require perfect reflections in most cases.
Simplify the shapes of the surrounding environement when painting metal.

This means mostly indicating **large features** such as the ground, the sky, and the light source.



Metal Armor Weathering

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Metal Armor Weathering (2/4)

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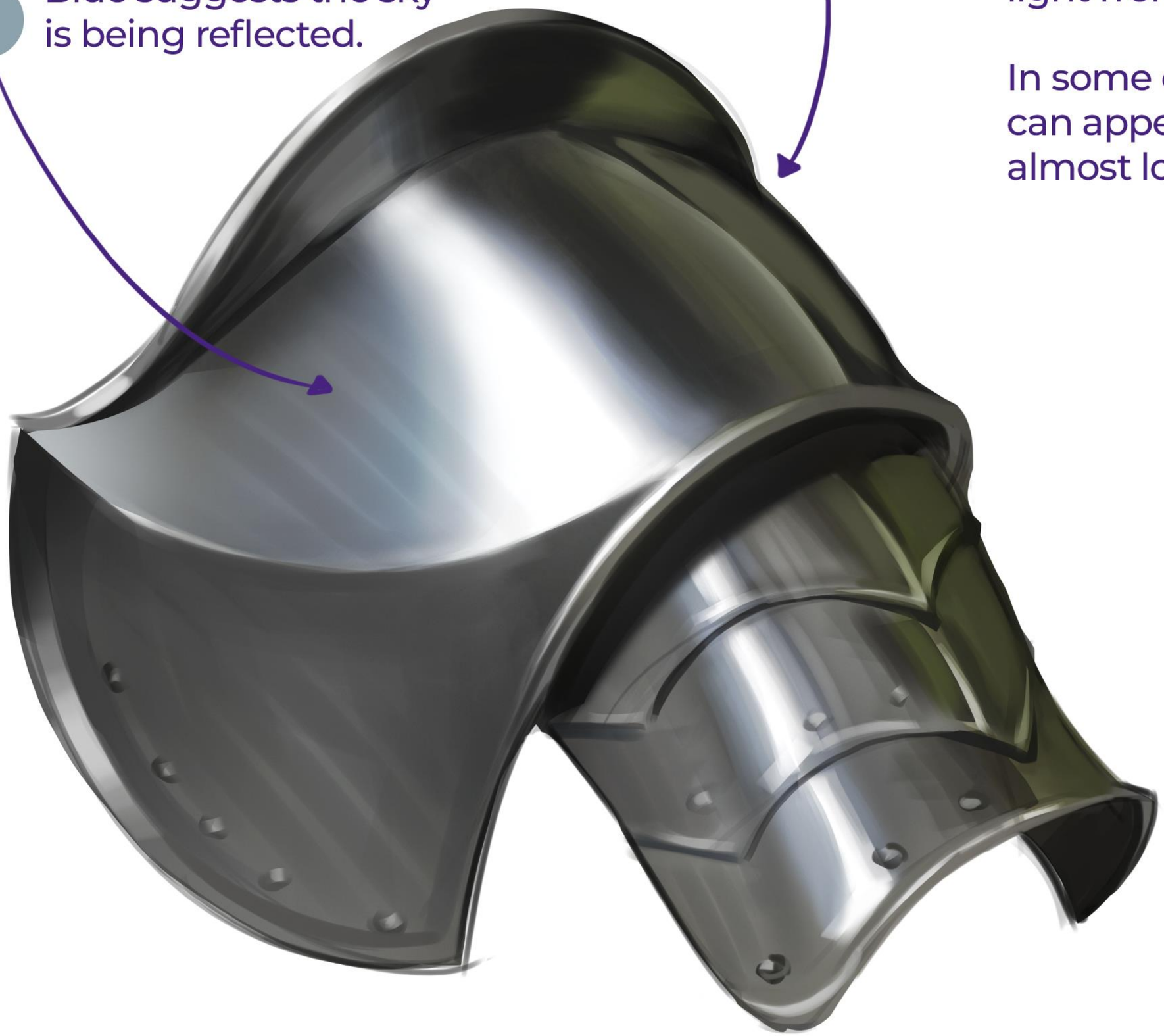
Armor will borrow color from the environment. Green suggests some trees or brushes are being reflected.

Blue suggests the sky is being reflected.



Polished Armor

Polished armor has a very smooth surface, which causes it to reflect a lot of light from the environment.

In some cases, the armor can appear so smooth that it almost looks fake!

It's important to consider that many stock photos online do not include the environment that influences the color of the armor!

Matte armor will still pick up some color from the environment, but it is much more subtle. In other cases, the armor may show hints of rust or discoloration.

Blue suggests the sky is being reflected.

Matte Armor

Matte armor is not nearly as reflective and is generally easier to paint. There isn't a clear highlight, as the light is much more diffused.
It's important to add some texture and hints of scratches to make it feel lived-in.

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Metal Armor Weathering (4/4)

Rust can be surprisingly saturated. Rust usually has yellow, orange and red colors.

Rusted / Damaged Armor

Rusted and damaged armor will not be polished and will appear very matte, with little to no highlights.

Don't be afraid to really rough up the piece—add bumps and cracks in the metal to show wear and tear. Rust will typically form around the grooves and edges of the armor, creating a range of reds and oranges.

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How to Render: Materials (1/3)

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Creating Glass

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How to Render: Materials (2/3)

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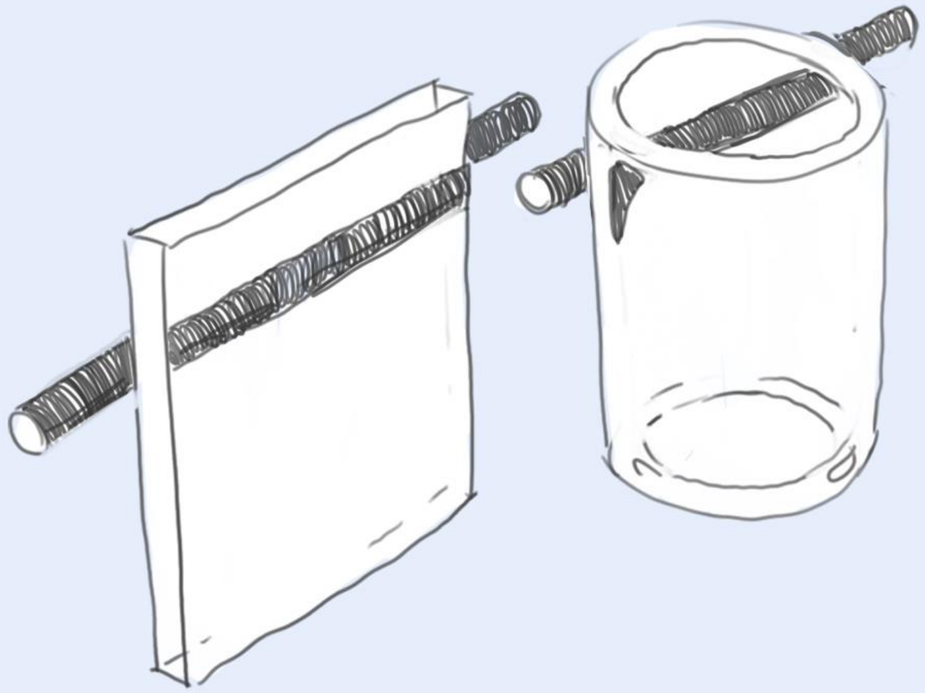
Refraction: Light bends when it changes media (from air to glass, to oil, etc.). *Objects appear disjointed and distorted.*



The shape of the glass impacts the distortion.

A filled glass distorts and reverses objects behind it, similar to a solid glass sphere.

To get these types of details right:

Observe life & references closely!

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How to Render: Materials (3/3)

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Diffuse Light Transmission:

Glass (frosted) appears **translucent**. Its rough surface **scatters light diffusely**. The image becomes blurry.

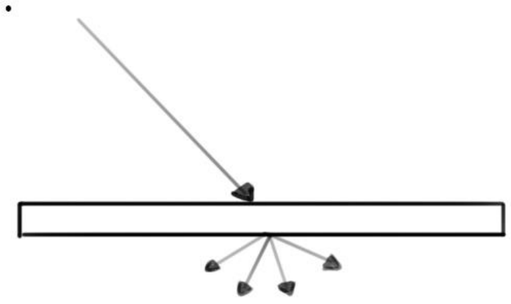


Image is distorted and blurry

Soft Highlight

Clear Light Transmission:

Glass (clear) appears **transparent**. Light is **not scattered** and the image is transferred clearly.

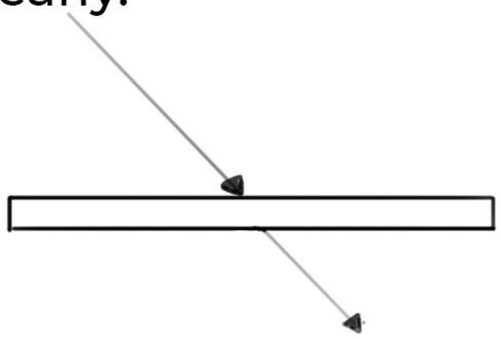
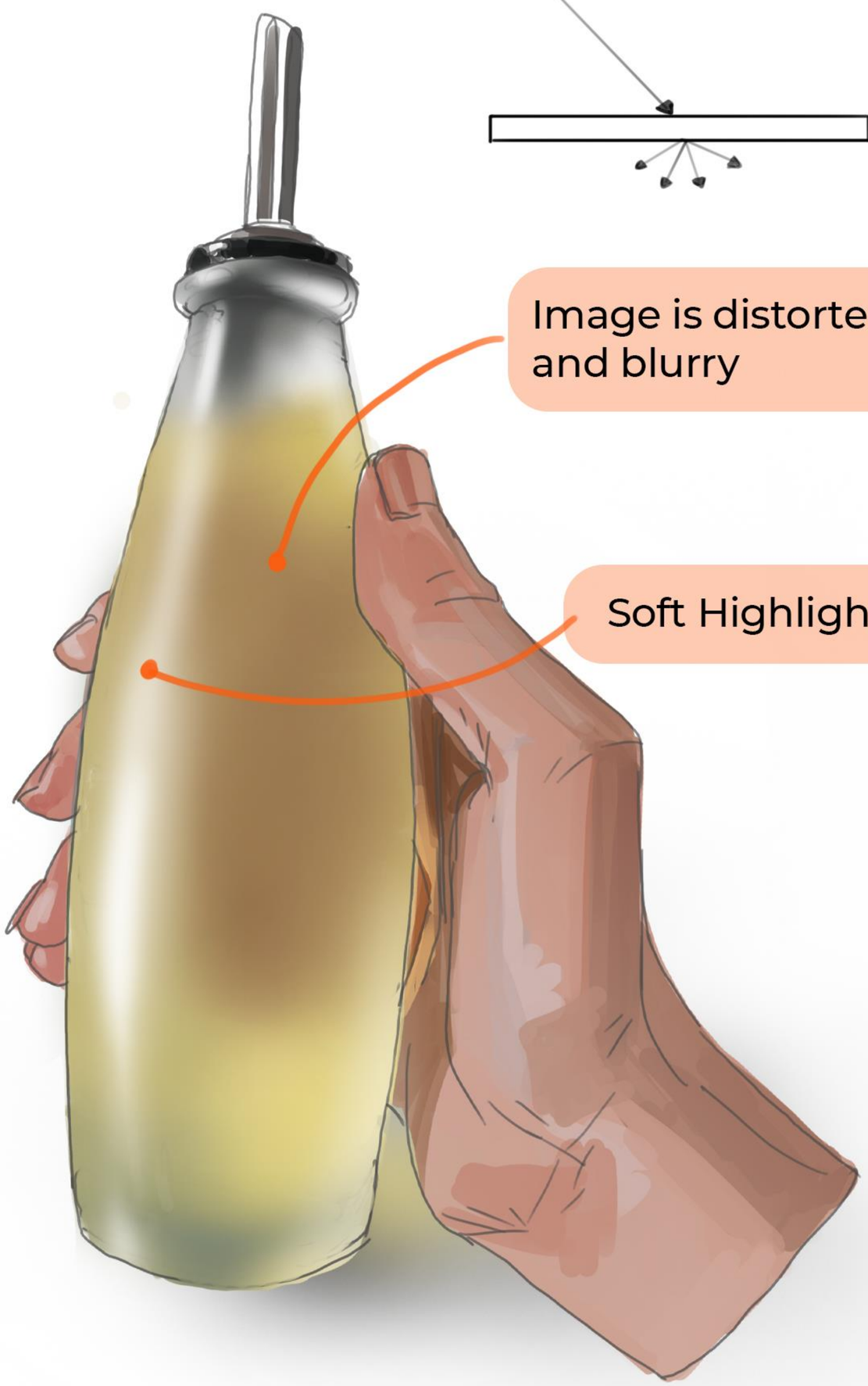


Image is distorted and clear

Sharp Highlight



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How do surfaces work to create believable materials?

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How to Render: Complex Materials (1/3)

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Complexity made Simple

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How to Render: Complex Materials (2/3)

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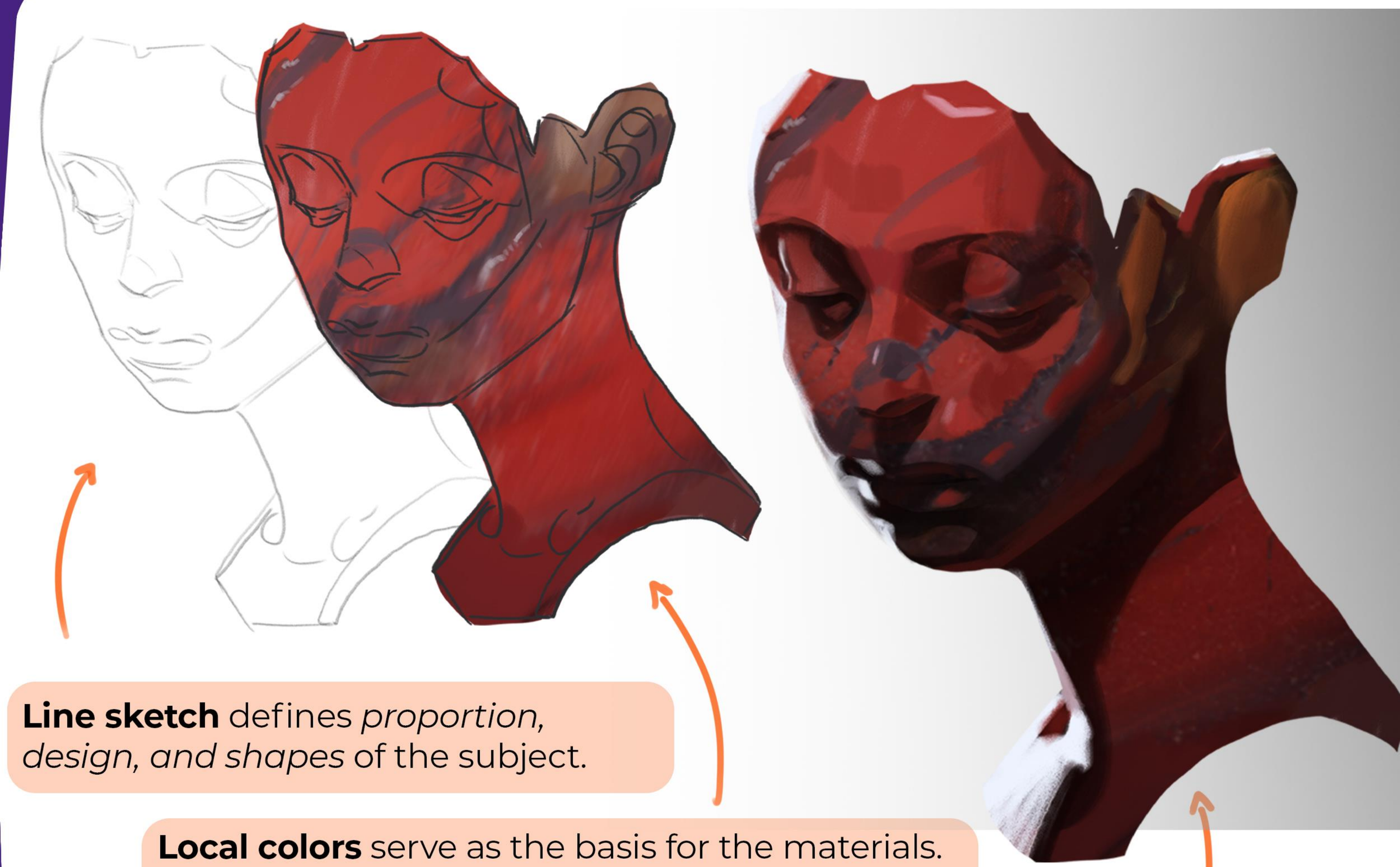

Line sketch defines *proportion, design, and shapes* of the subject.

Local colors serve as the basis for the materials. Think of it as the *material under neutral diffuse lighting*.

Light and shadow indicate form and create dimensionality.
Besides local value, any value change indicates form change.

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How to Render: Complex Materials (3/3)

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Subsurface Scattering can happen at thinner, back-lit sections of a form

Add **specular highlights** to finish the material and form rendering.

Specular highlights show the surface quality of a material

Soft, diffuse = Matte/rough

Clear, sharp = Glossy/polished

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Secrets of a Stone Bird (1/4)

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Secrets of a Stone Bird

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Secrets of a Stone Bird (2/4)

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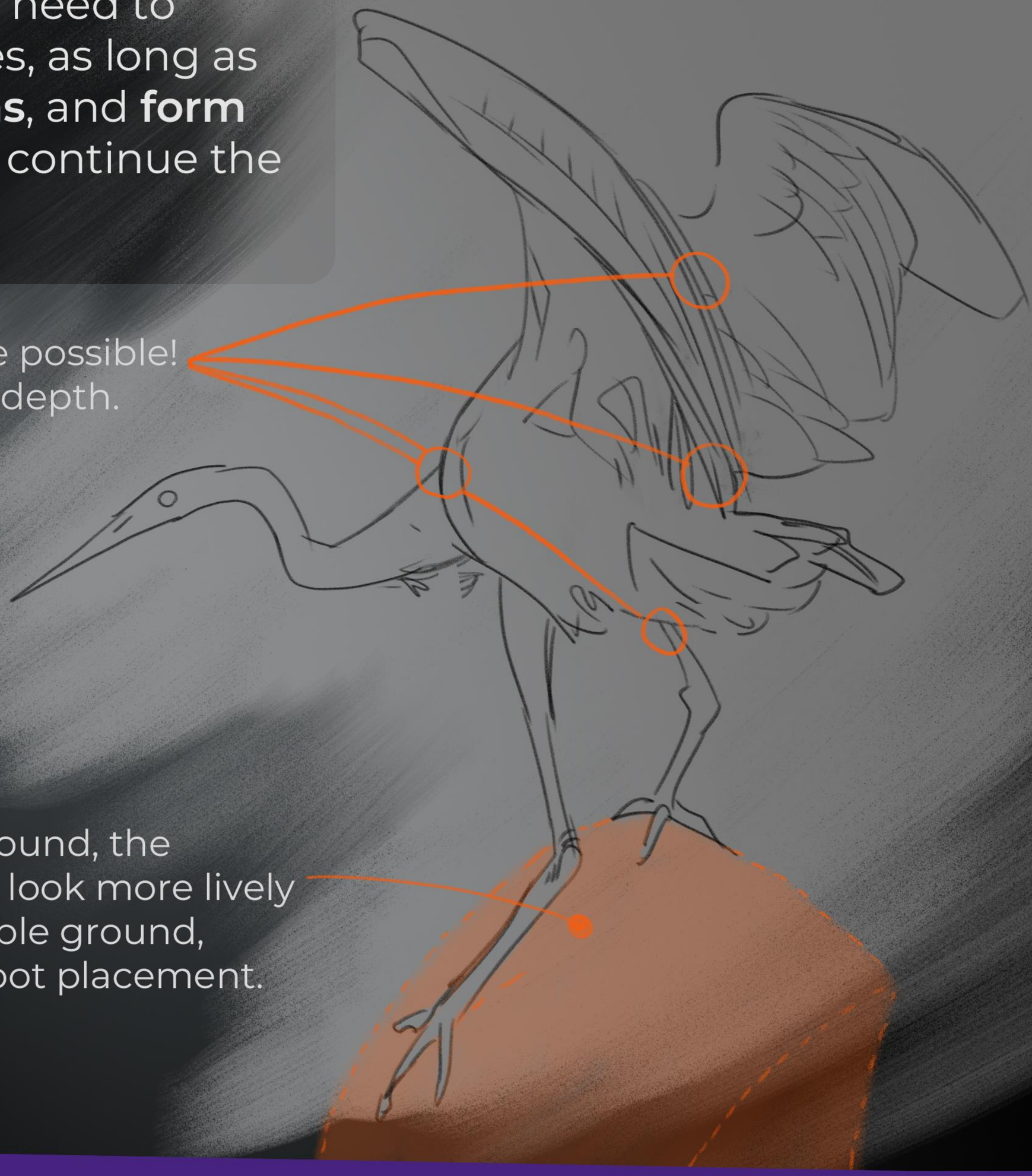
Know what to paint!

The sketch doesn't need to feature perfect lines, as long as **design**, **proportions**, and **form** are clear for you to continue the process.

Include **overlap** where possible!
This helps add form & depth.



Even without a background, the gesture of the bird can look more lively by indicating the invisible ground, through gesture and foot placement.

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Secrets of a Stone Bird (3/4)

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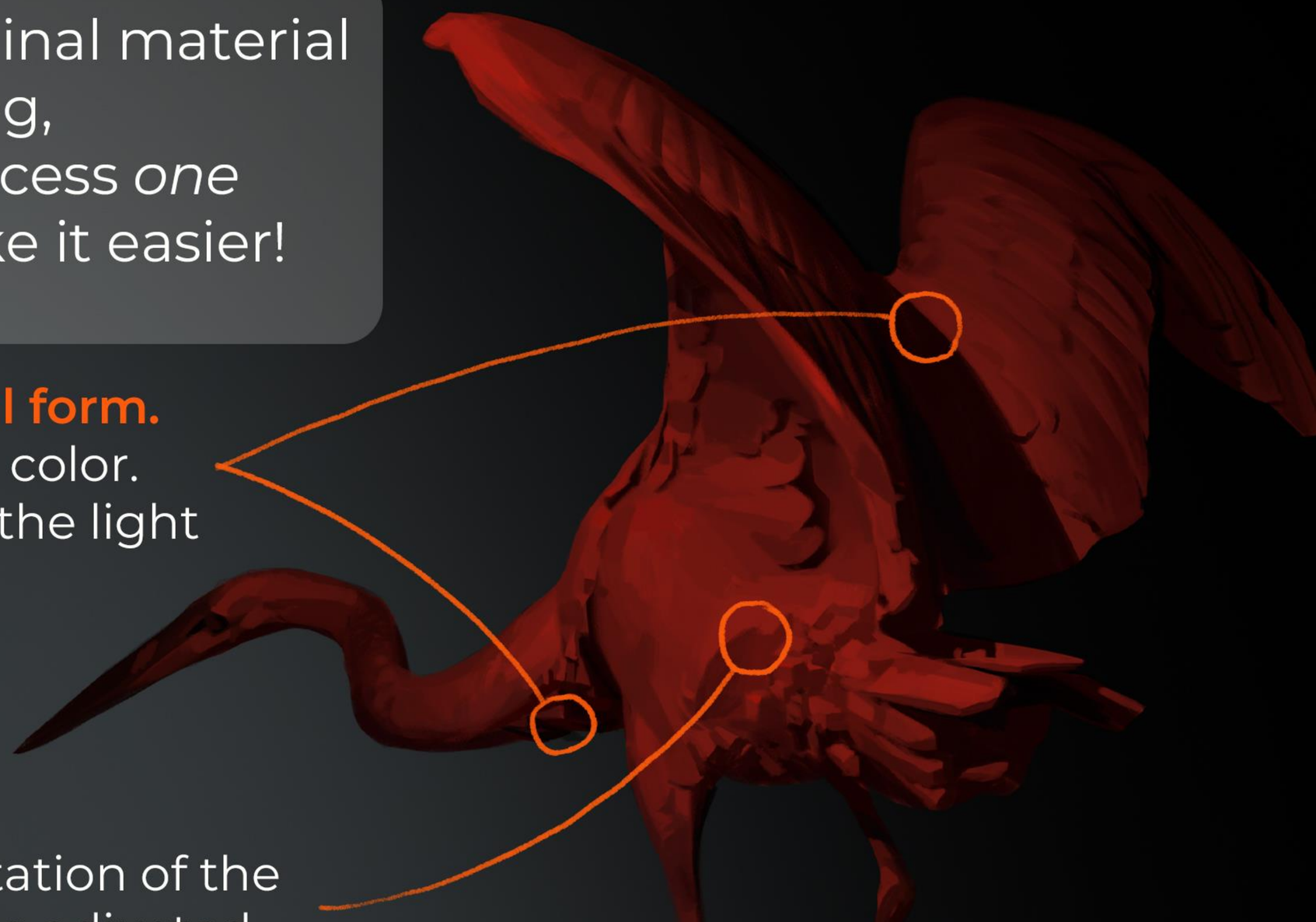
Keep the look of the final material in mind when painting, but approach the process *one step at a time* to make it easier!

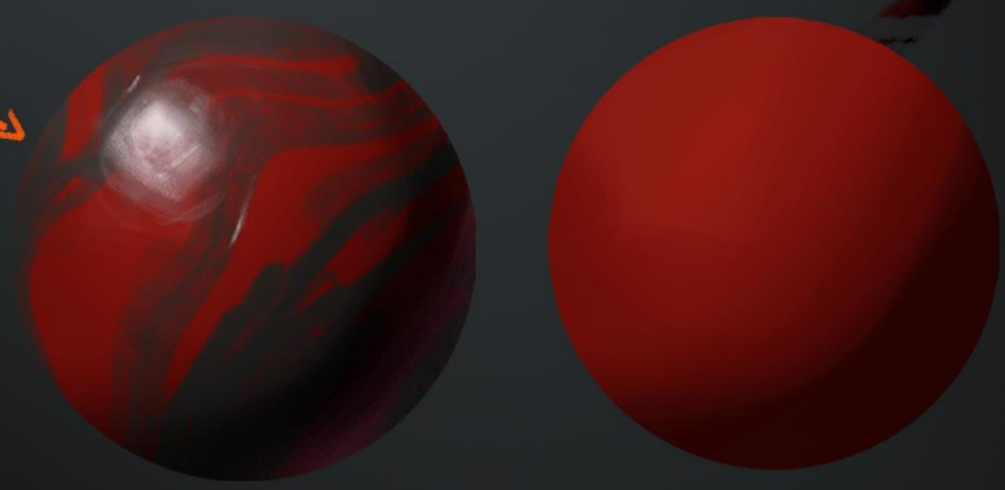
Light and shadow reveal form.
Add it on top of the local color.
Knowing the position of the light source is key!



Depending on the orientation of the surface, values need to be adjusted.

Value change = Form change

Material Goal



Current level of complexity

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Secrets of a Stone Bird (4/4)

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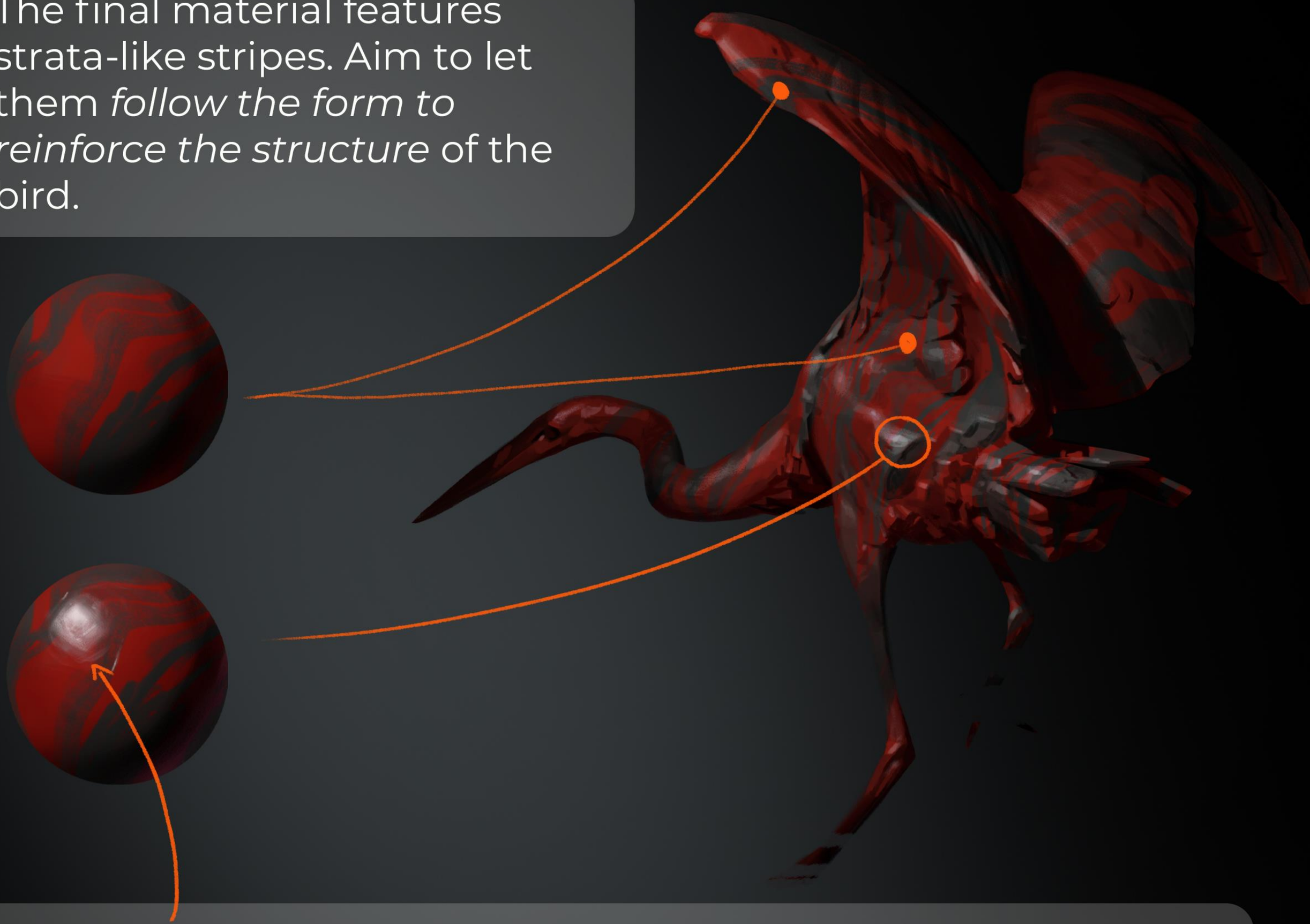
The final material features strata-like stripes. Aim to let them *follow the form to reinforce the structure* of the bird.



Add the specular highlight to indicate the **smoothness** of the surface. In this case, the jasper is not very polished and features a slightly diffuse highlight.

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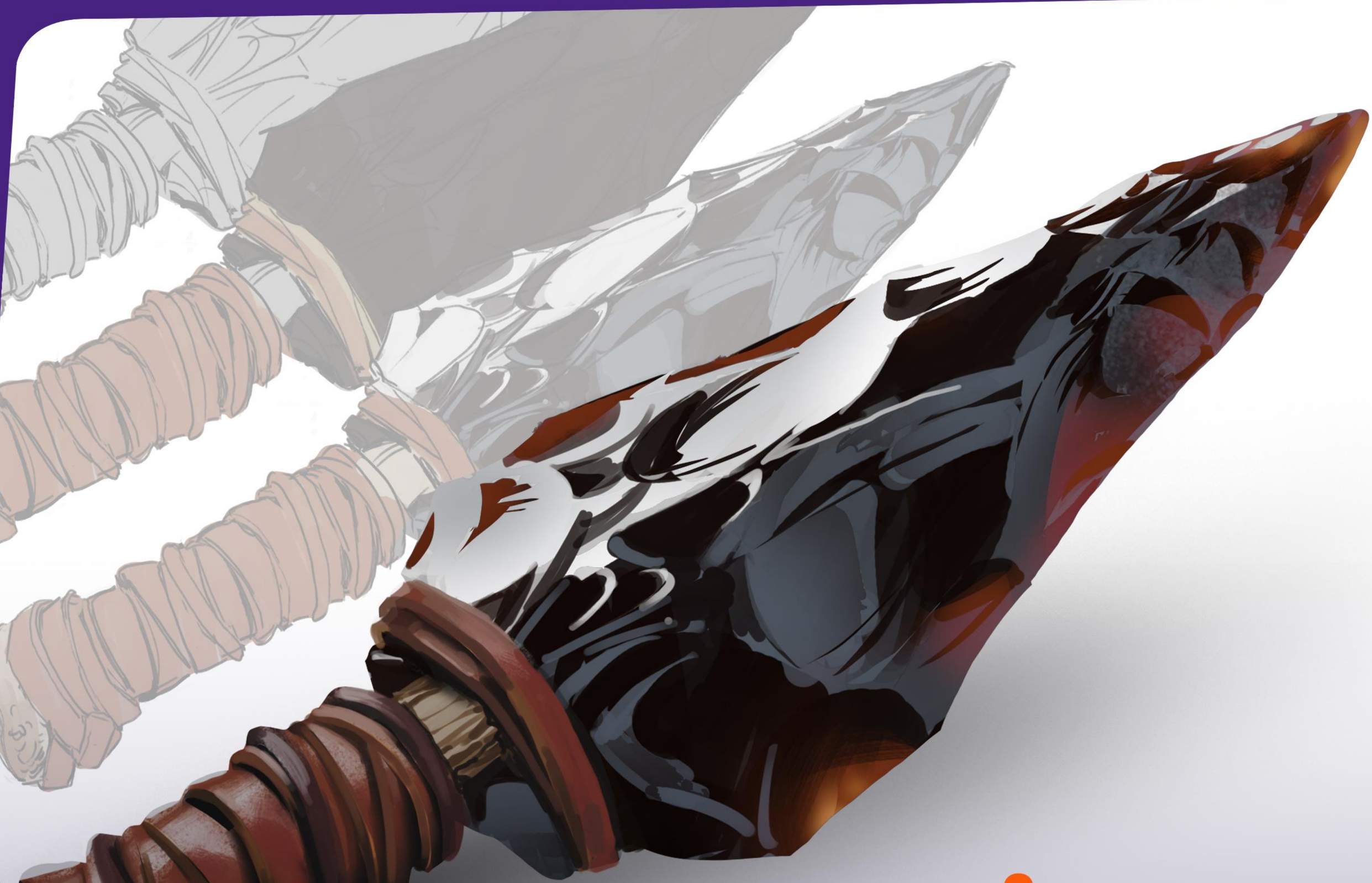

How to paint Obsidian

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

How to Paint Obsidian (2/4)

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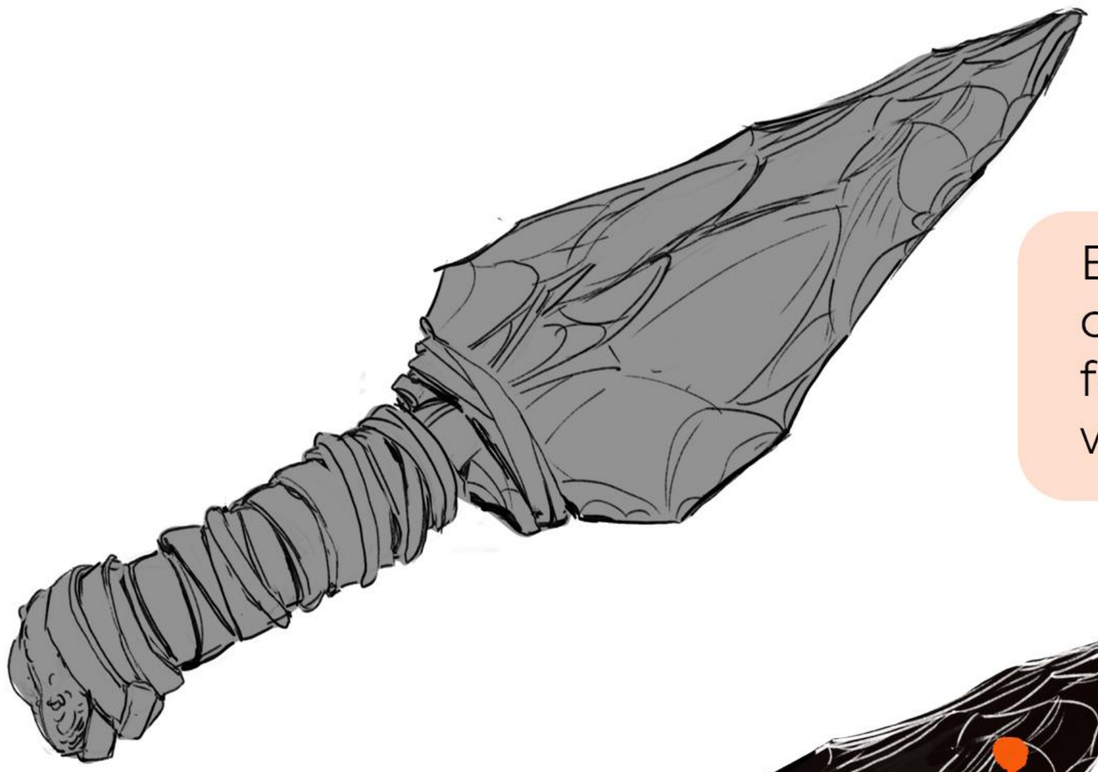
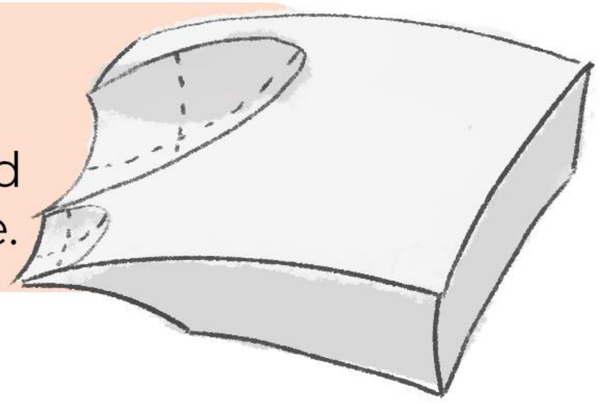


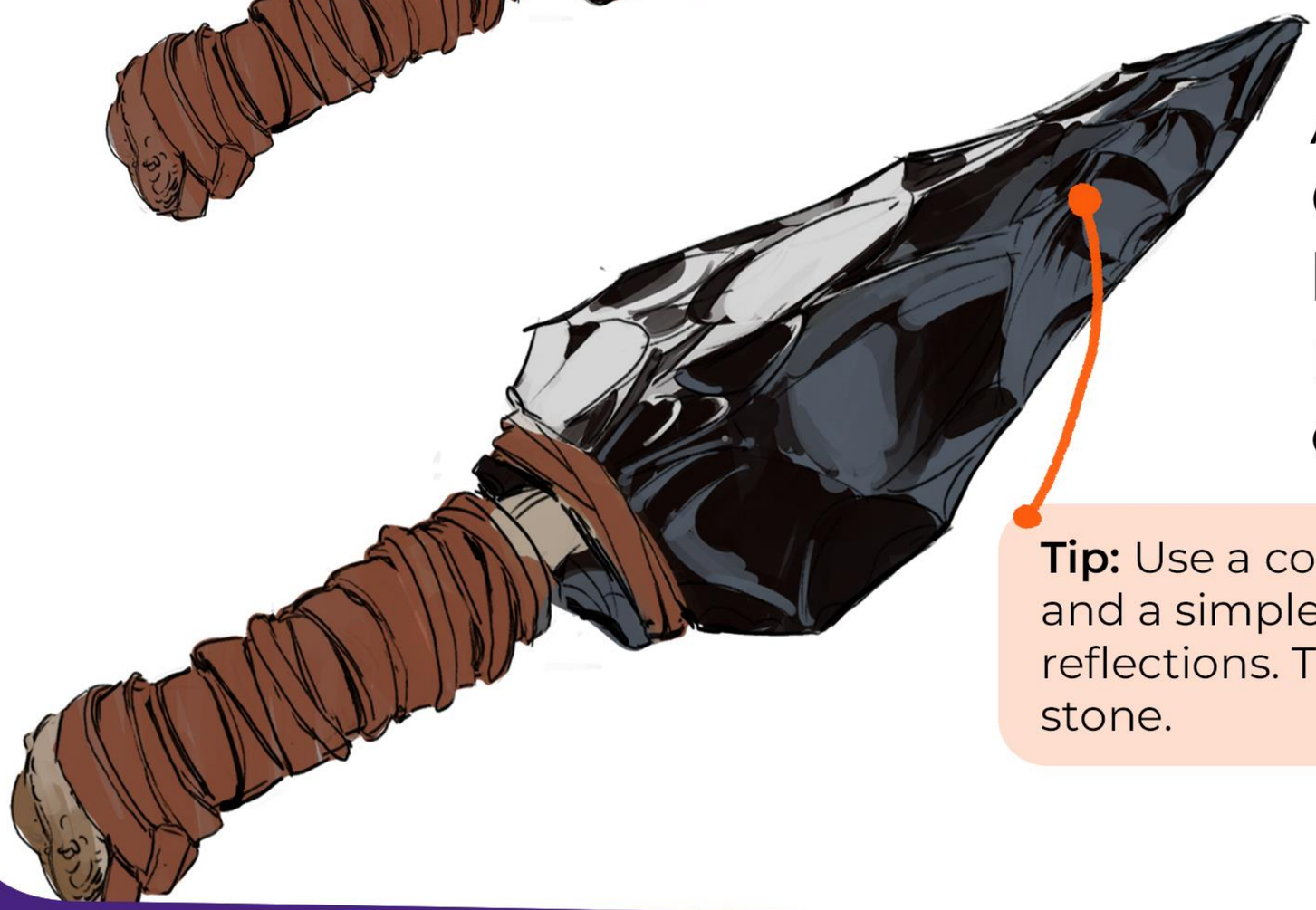
Lines clarify design, form, and shape.

Broken obsidian tends to create concave surface features. Keep this in mind when designing the stone.



Local Color sets materials apart.

Tip: To see the line drawing, overpaint the lines with white in areas of dark local colors.



Apply light to the stone. Obsidian is **glossy and highly reflective**. Use mostly hard edges to create these reflections.

Tip: Use a combination of the **Lasso Tool** and a simple brush to paint the reflections. They reveal the form of the stone.

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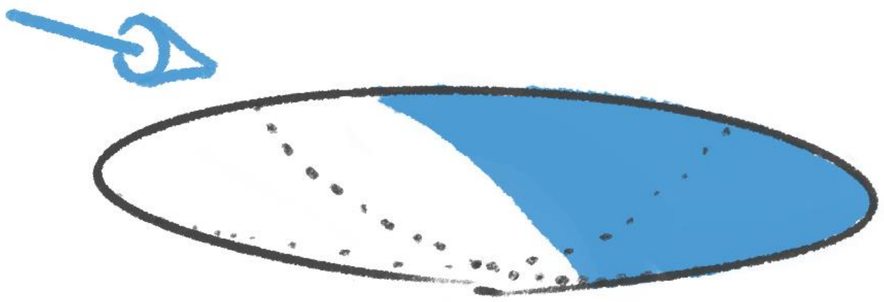
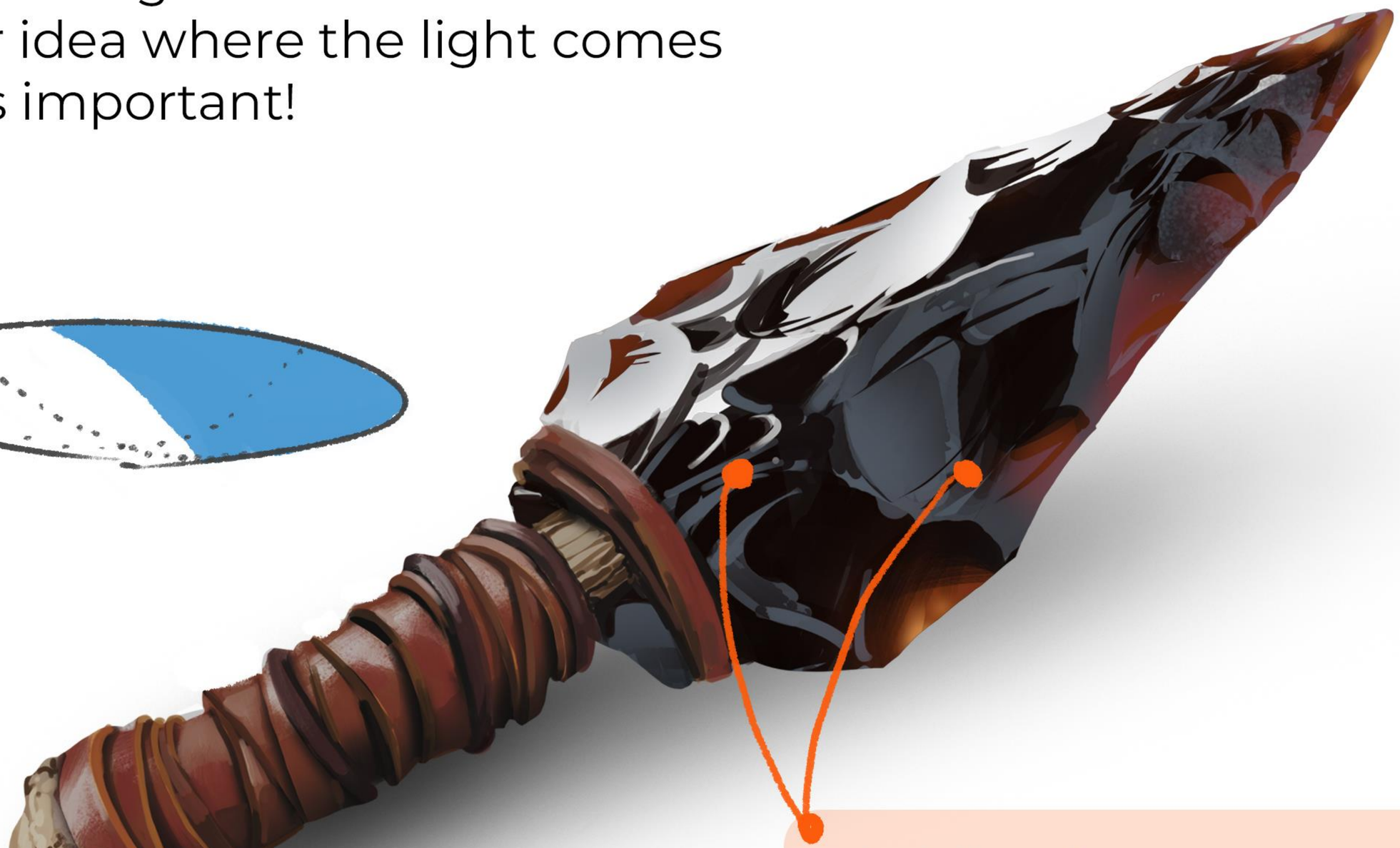
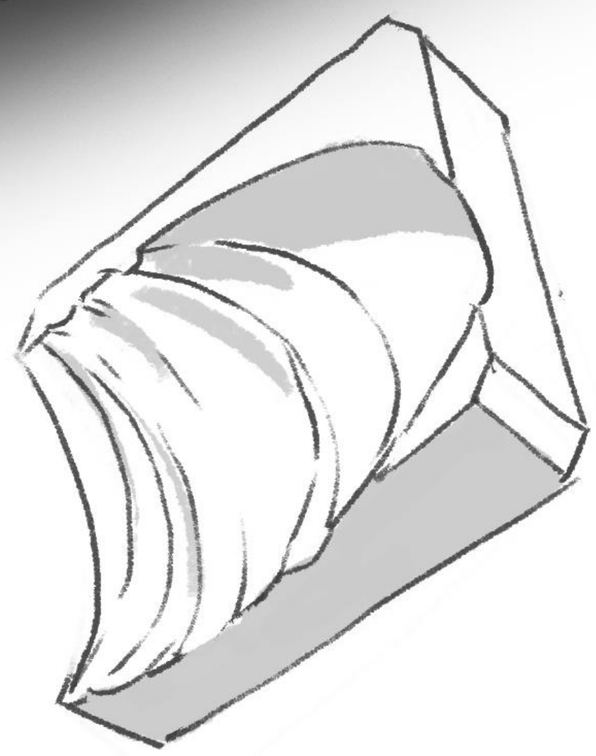
How to Paint Obsidian (3/4)

The **concave** (curved inwards) surfaces reflect the light.
A clear idea where the light comes from is important!







Obsidian features **fractures** that often resemble little **waves and ripples**. Small shapes following the curves of the fracture can indicate this detail.

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How to Paint Obsidian (4/4)

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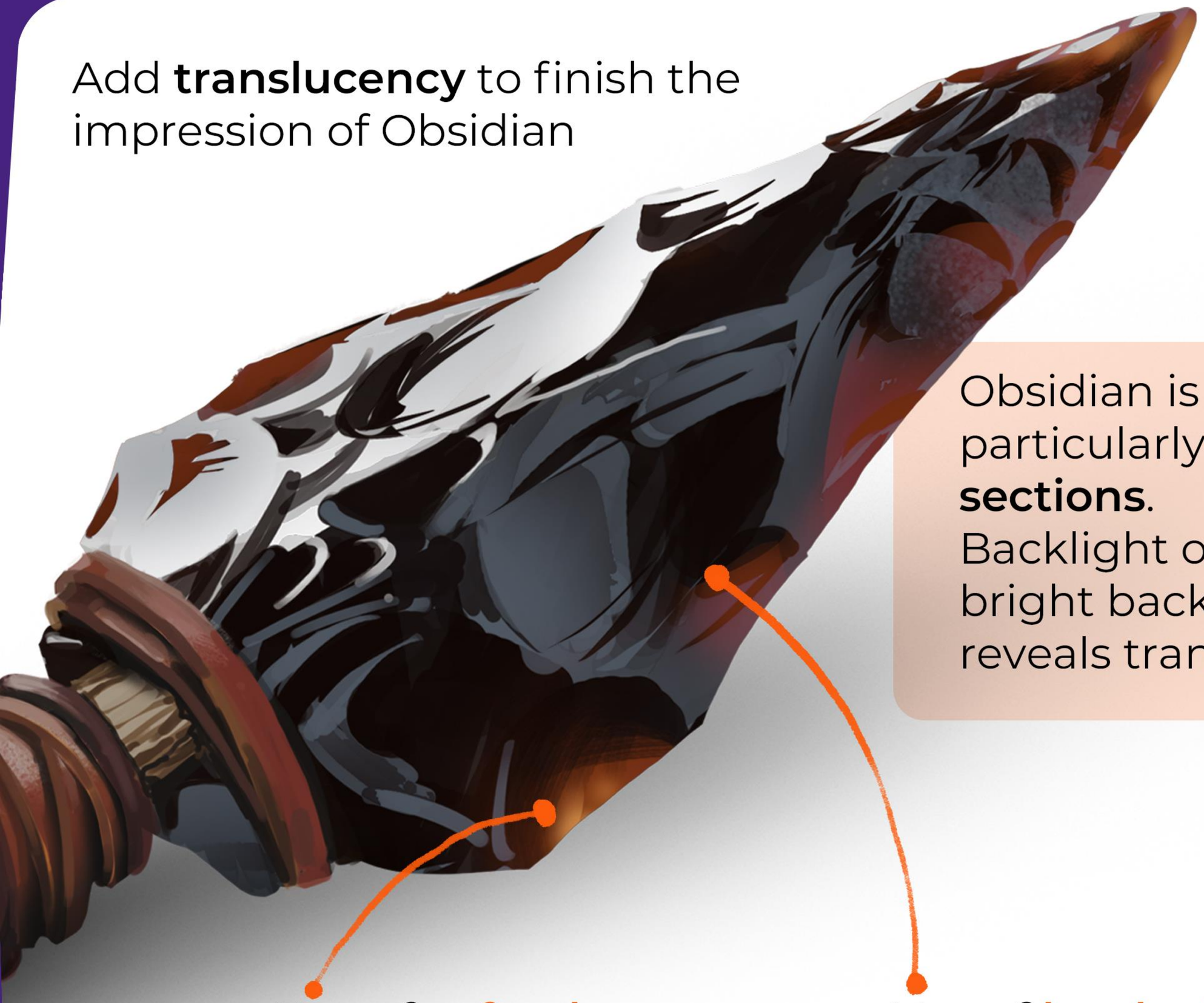
Add **translucency** to finish the impression of Obsidian



Obsidian is translucent, particularly in **thinner sections**.
Backlight or an overall bright background reveals translucency.

Use of soft edges:
Indicates the *gradual thickening* of the stone.

Use of hard edges:
Indicates *refraction due to surface changes*.

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Dragon Fire & Ice Wind (1/4)

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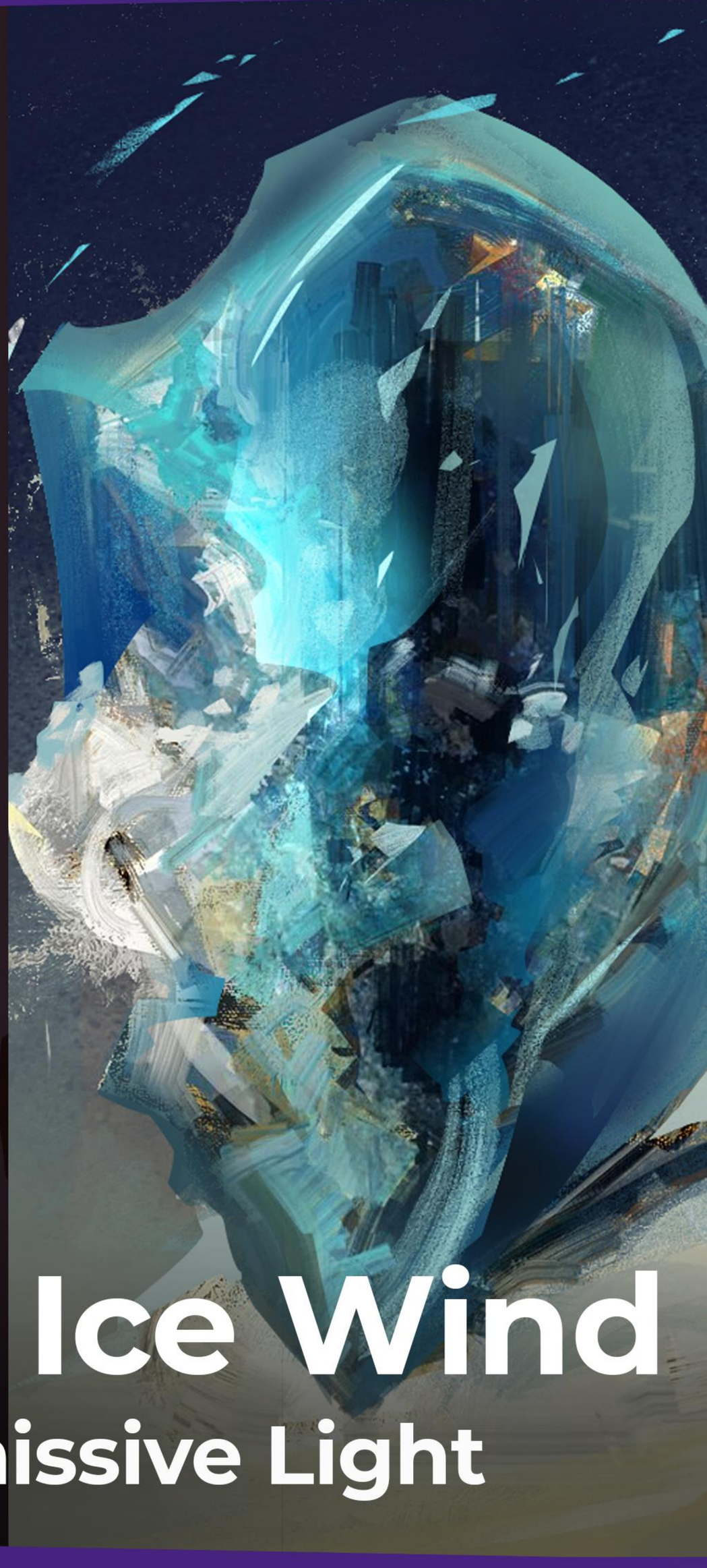

Dragon Fire & Ice Wind

Tips on Texture and Emissive Light

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Dragon Fire & Ice Wind (2/4)

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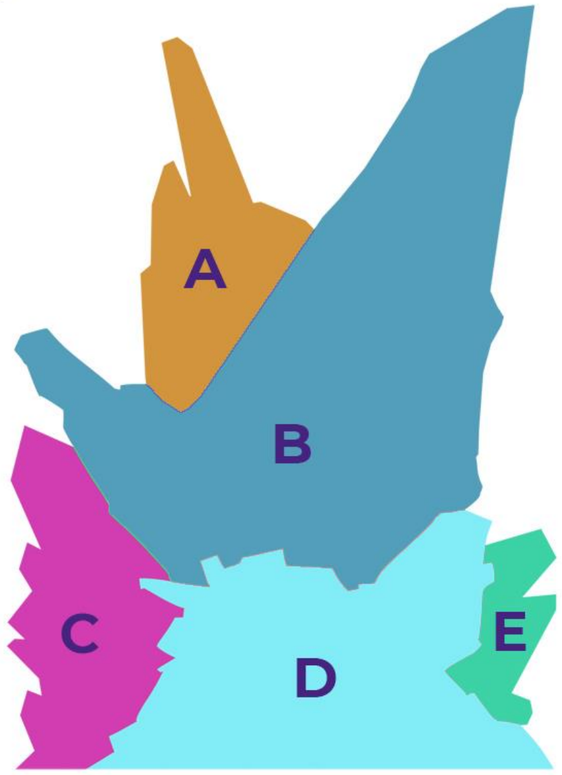
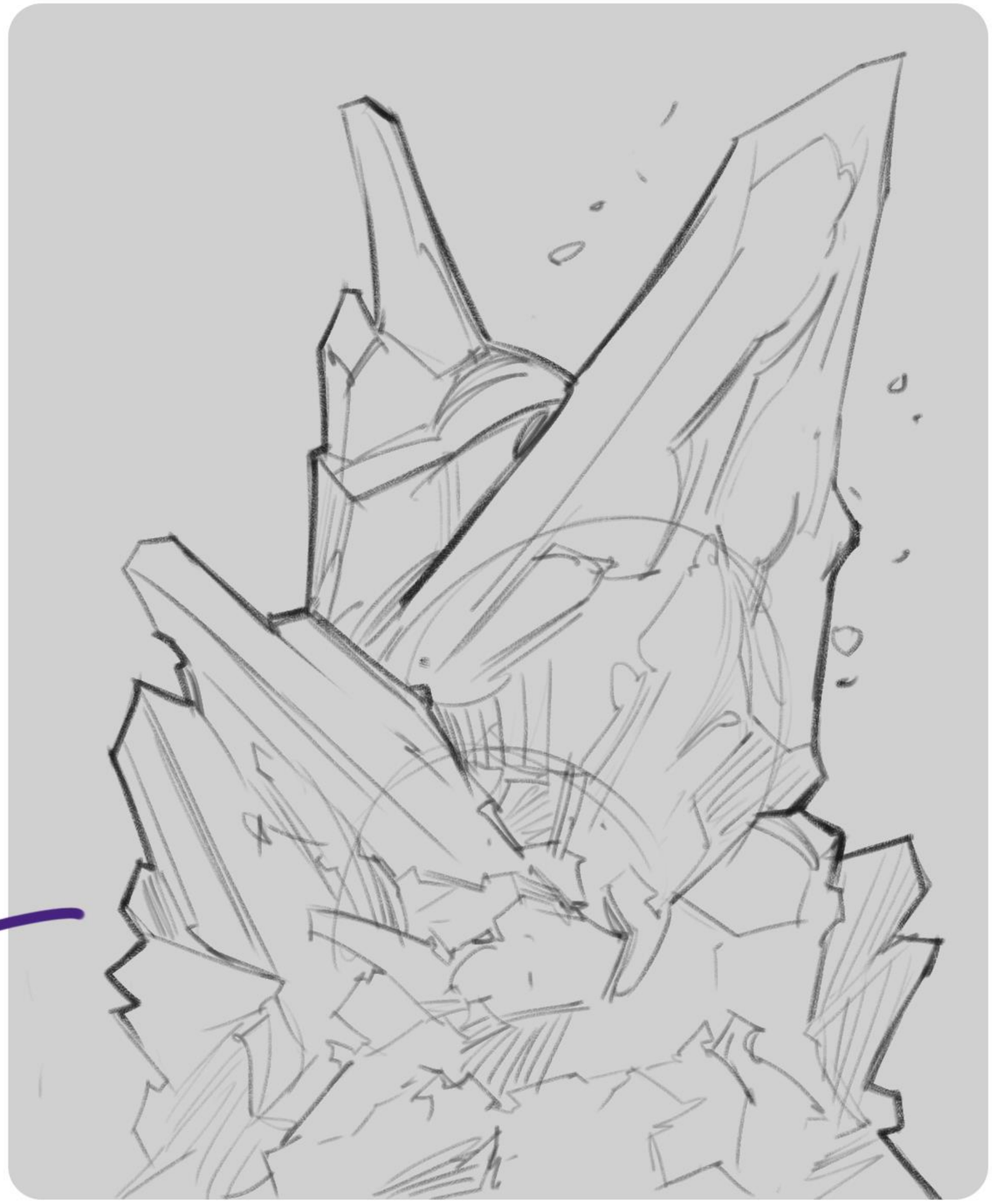


Splitting components

Step 1

In the sketch phase, make sure you create separation - so you know how you can process the next step.



Step 2

Focus on how your light emission works — where it starts, which area is the strongest, and how it fades across the crystal. Pay attention to softer light and reflections from the environment.

Take it step by step

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Dragon Fire & Ice Wind (3/4)

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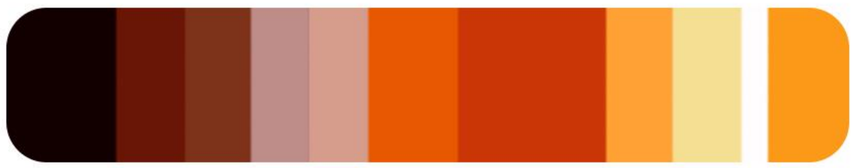
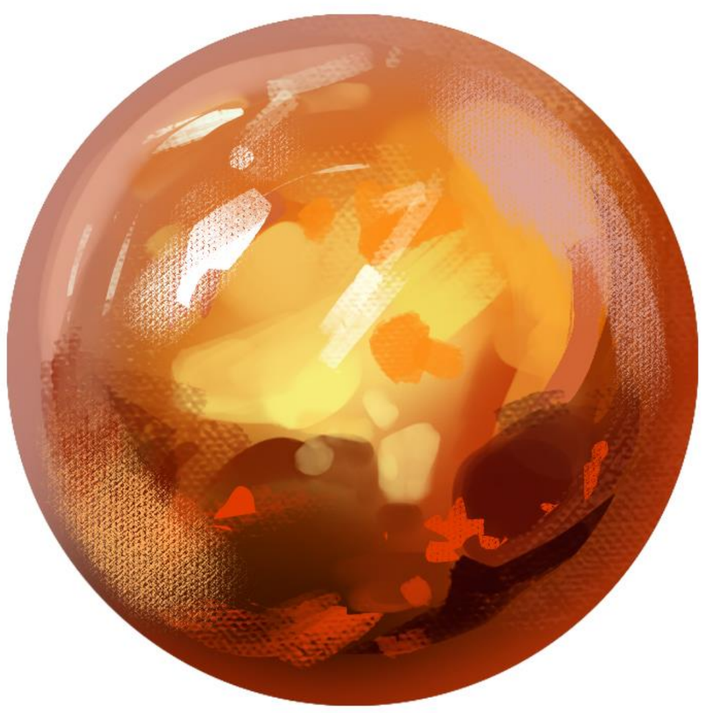
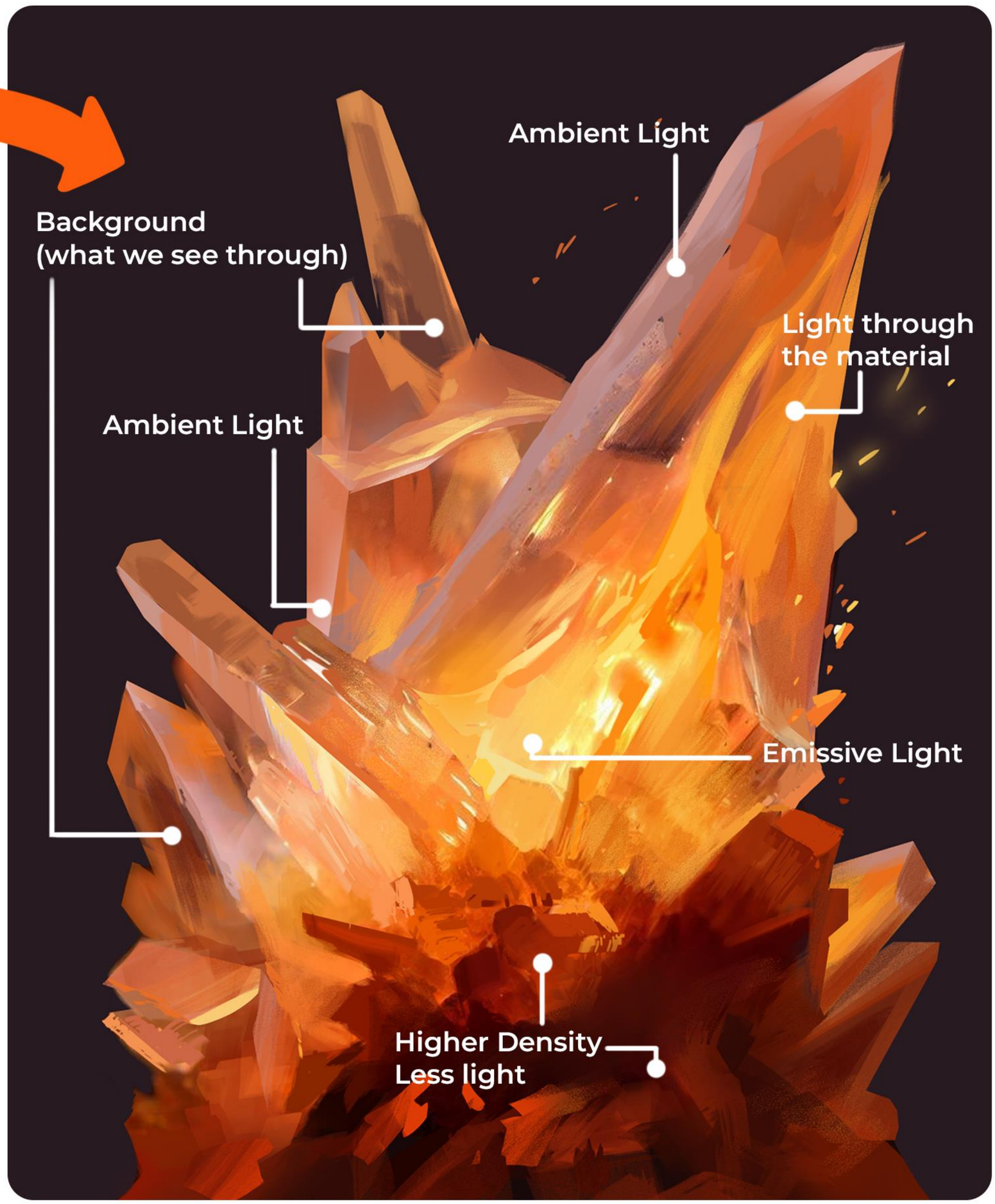
Color







For starters, use a reference - and then try out some adjustments, like pushing certain areas.

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Dragon Fire & Ice Wind (4/4)

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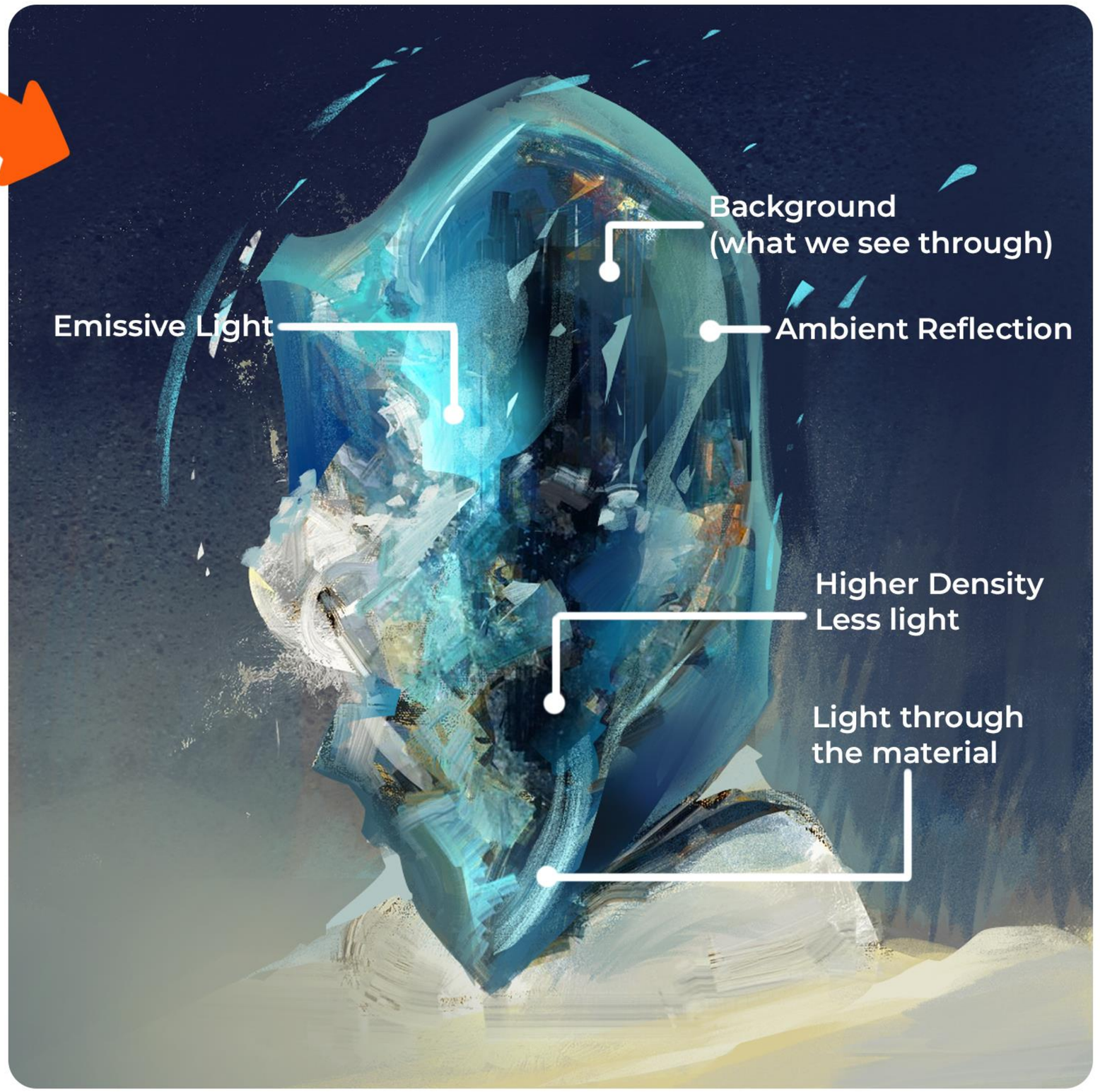
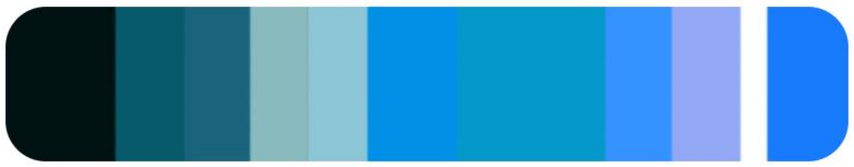
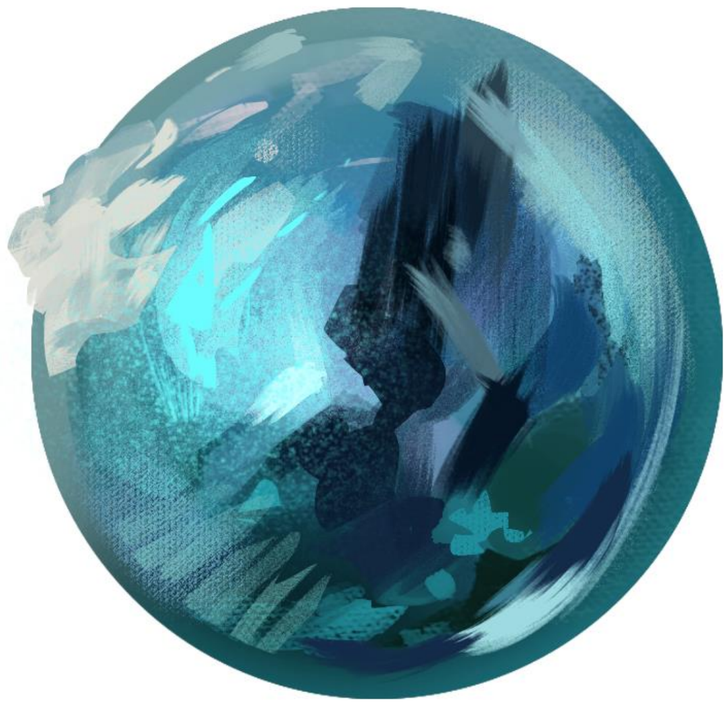


Color





The key is practice - remember, there should be freedom in the brush usage. Using Smudge tool - textured brushes - combined with soft brushes, full opacity brushes and gradients.

Get more tips on glowing objects in this free lesson

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to go to the course

In Flames

Tips on on painting moving flames

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In Flames (2/4)

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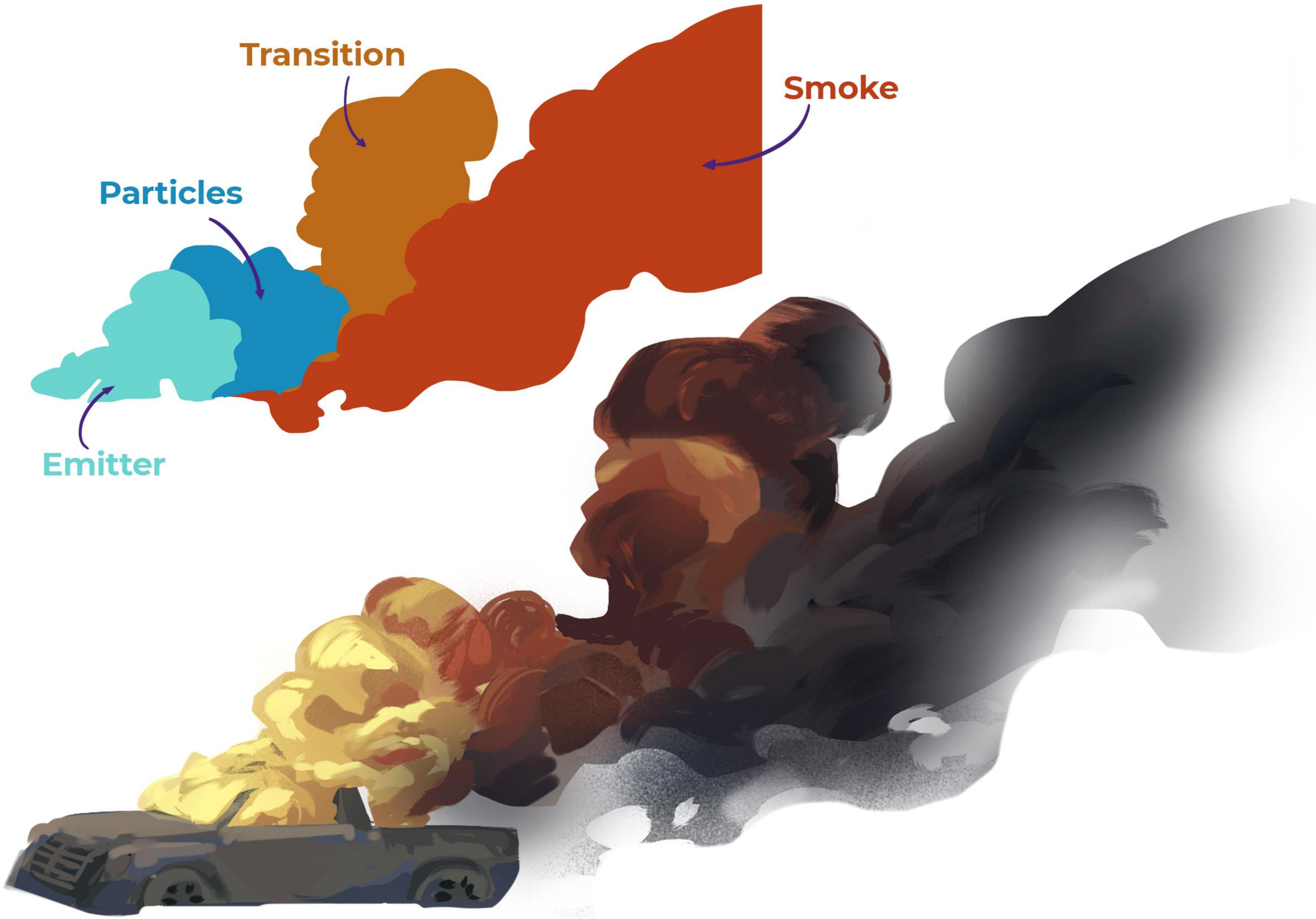
Painting Flames can be a challenge. We will go through a couple of steps understanding what are their main components and how you can paint better flames in general.



Keep your components simple

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In Flames (3/4)

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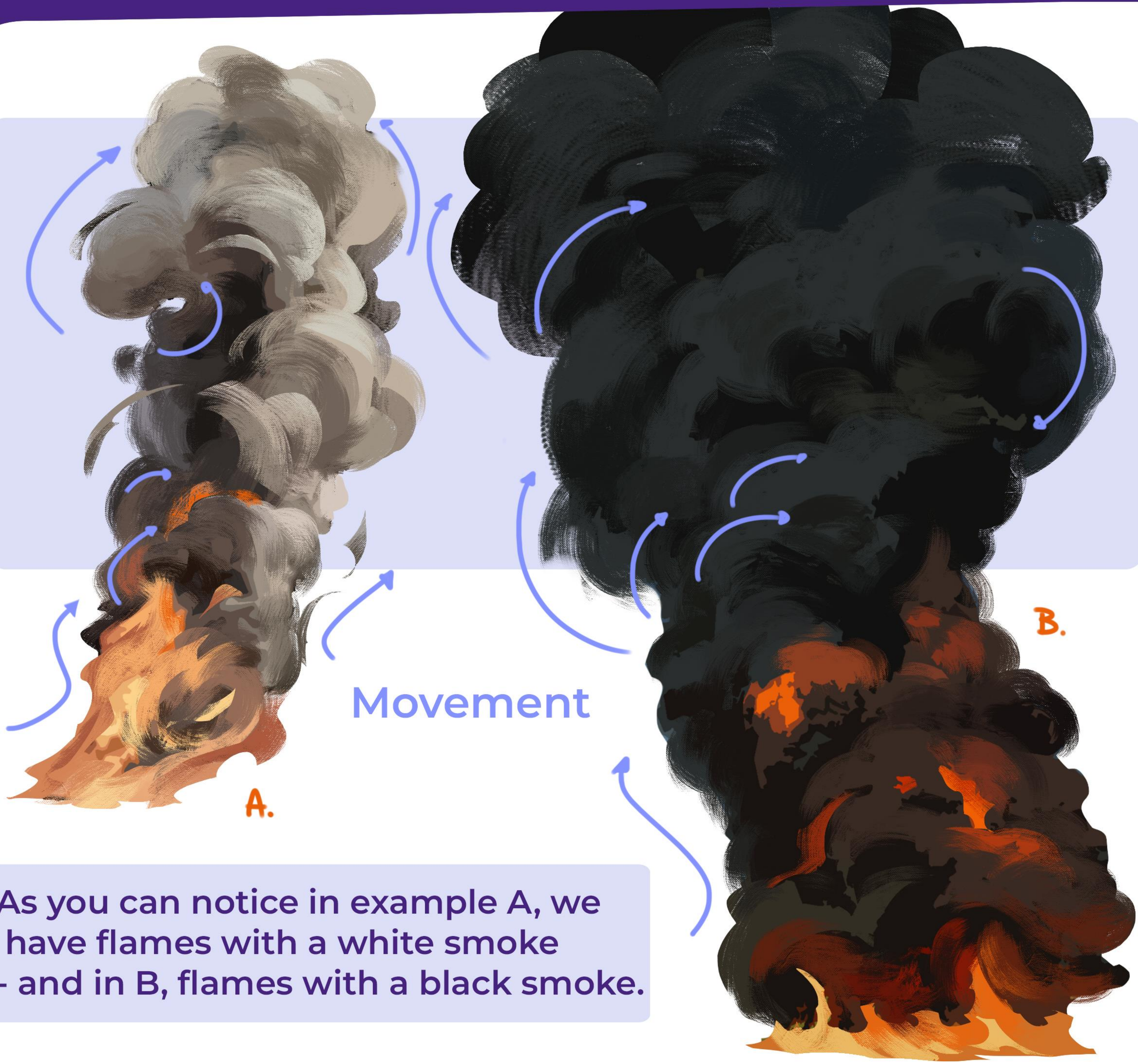

As you can notice in example A, we have flames with a white smoke - and in B, flames with a black smoke.

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In Flames (4/4)

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After you understand how to create flames - now you can think about context.

A couple of things to keep in mind about context:

1. Mood and lighting - for example, it's better to have a darker scene to create a focal point through fire and smoke.

2. Highlights - are useful because they can attract the viewer into the scene.

3. Value range and color structure - having a simple value range, having soft value transitions and using saturation smartly is the way to go.

Have fun and try it out!

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Painting Lizard Skin

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Painting Lizard Skin (2/4)

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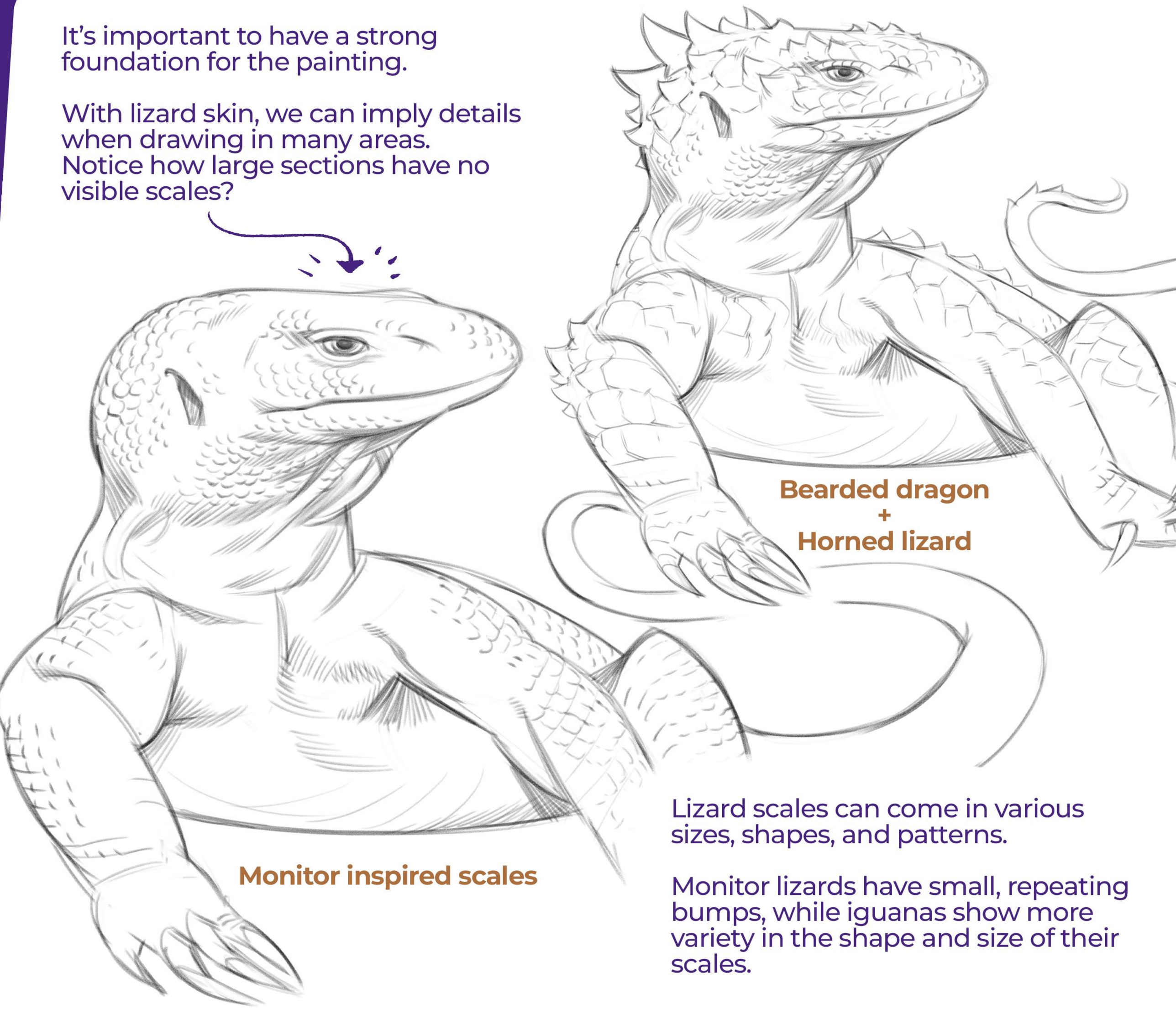
It's important to have a strong foundation for the painting.

With lizard skin, we can imply details when drawing in many areas. Notice how large sections have no visible scales?



Monitor inspired scales

Bearded dragon + Horned lizard

Lizard scales can come in various sizes, shapes, and patterns.

Monitor lizards have small, repeating bumps, while iguanas show more variety in the shape and size of their scales.

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Painting Lizard Skin (3/4)

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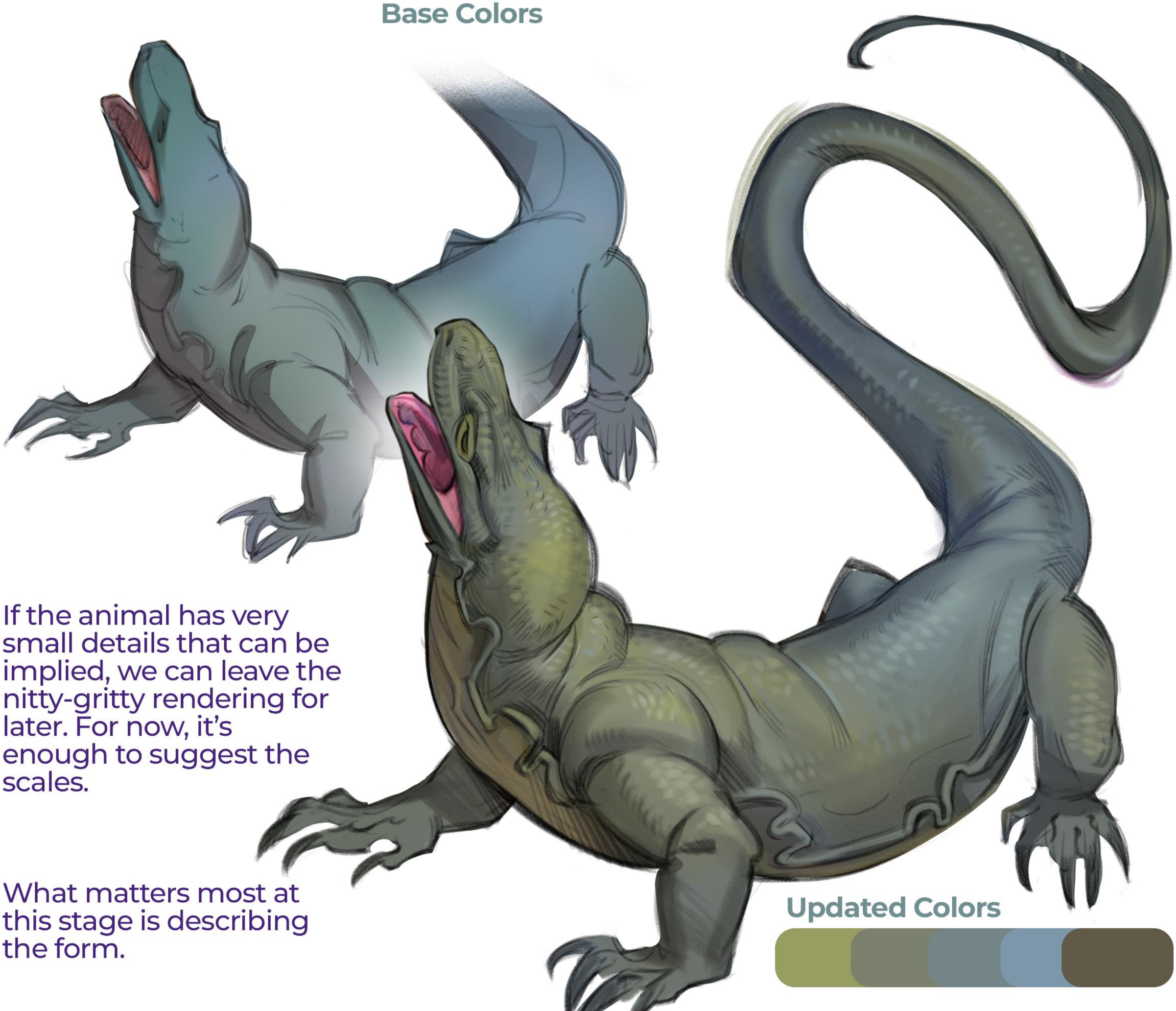
When we have a sketch, we can begin to add base colors and shadows.

Base Colors



If the animal has very small details that can be implied, we can leave the nitty-gritty rendering for later. For now, it's enough to suggest the scales.

What matters most at this stage is describing the form.

Updated Colors

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Painting Lizard Skin (4/4)

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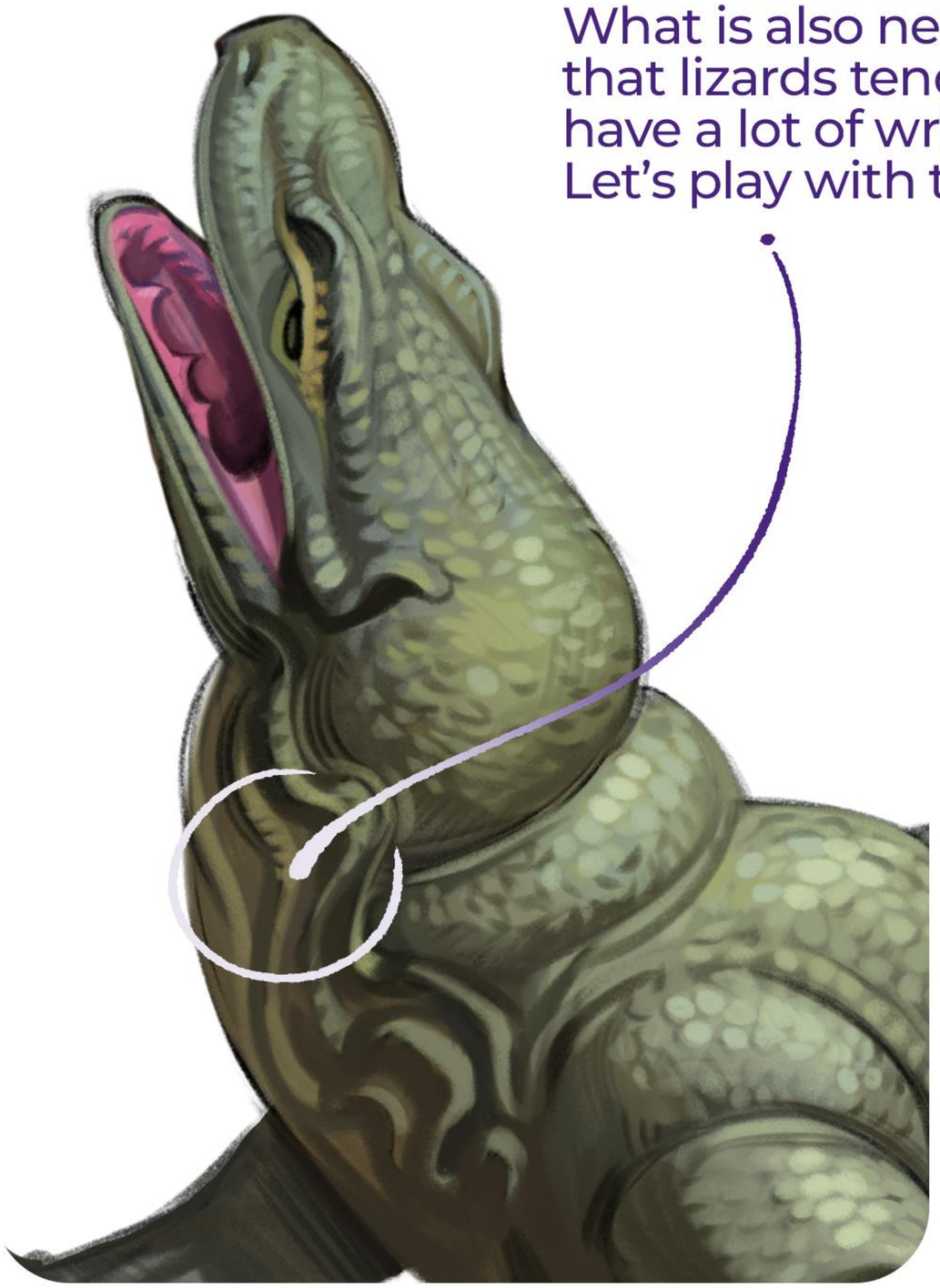
Lizards often have a wide range of local colors and patterns. Some monitor lizards display complex markings, which can easily become overwhelming.

We can save those patterns for later and use layer modes like ***Multiply*** to handle most of the work.

What is also neat is that lizards tend to have a lot of wrinkles! Let's play with that.



Final Colors

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How to Render Characters (1/3)

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Head Rendering Critique

from the NEW COURSE

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How to Render Characters (2/3)

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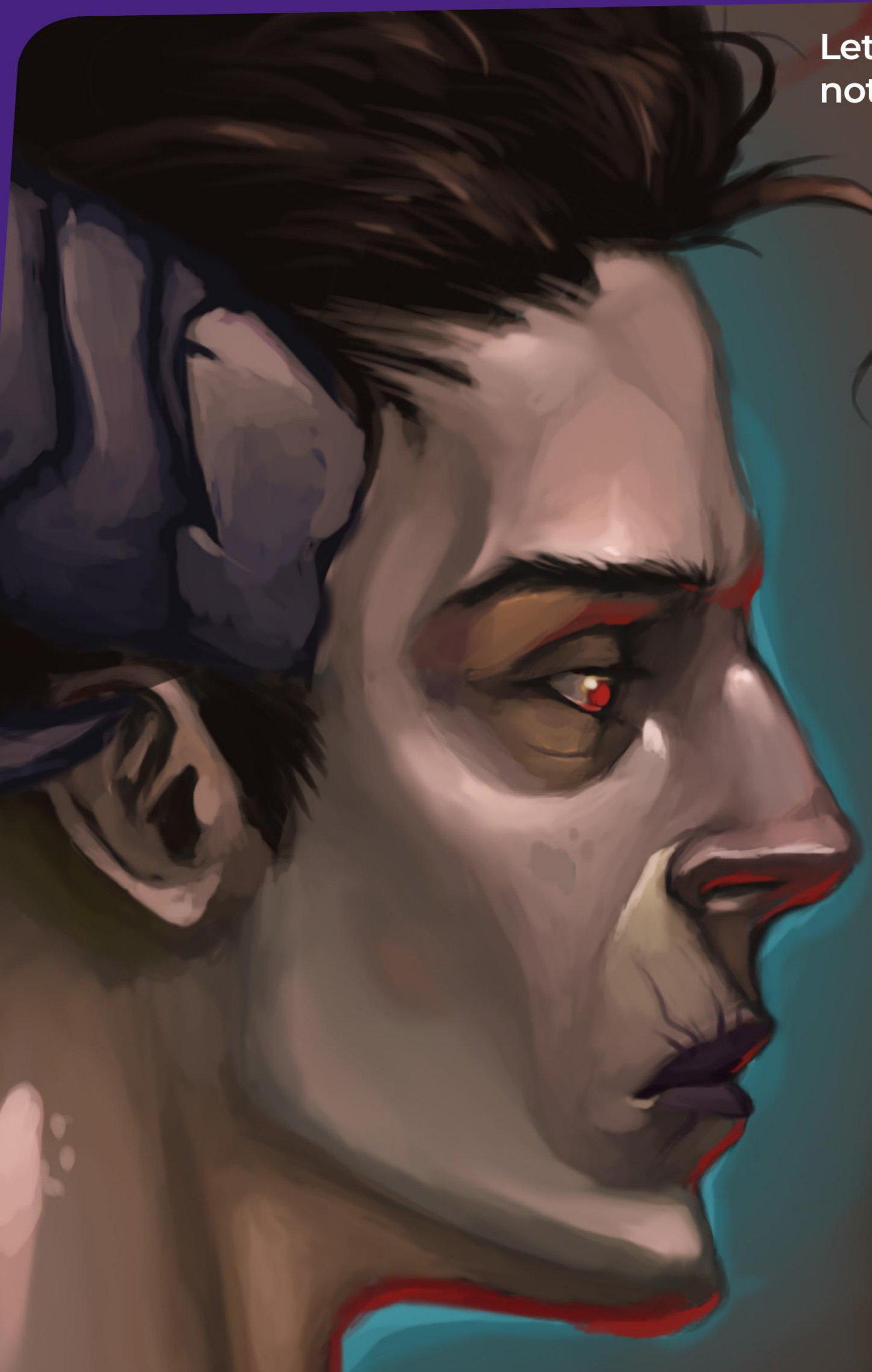

Let's analyze and see what is not working on this old artwork:

Broken Proportions

- The nose is too short and sharp. Even if it's stylized, it doesn't look natural.

- The chin is too pointy.

- The orbits and zygomatic bone are misplaced.

Inconsistent Values

The dark and light values are too close together, which causes muddiness in the overall piece.

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How to Render Characters (3/3)

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What makes this portrait better?

Proportions are Believable

Nose, chin and orbits have been adjusted.

Values are Balanced

The brushwork in this version is cleaner and more appealing. This is due to the way values are mixed, the blending techniques used, and the direction of the strokes.

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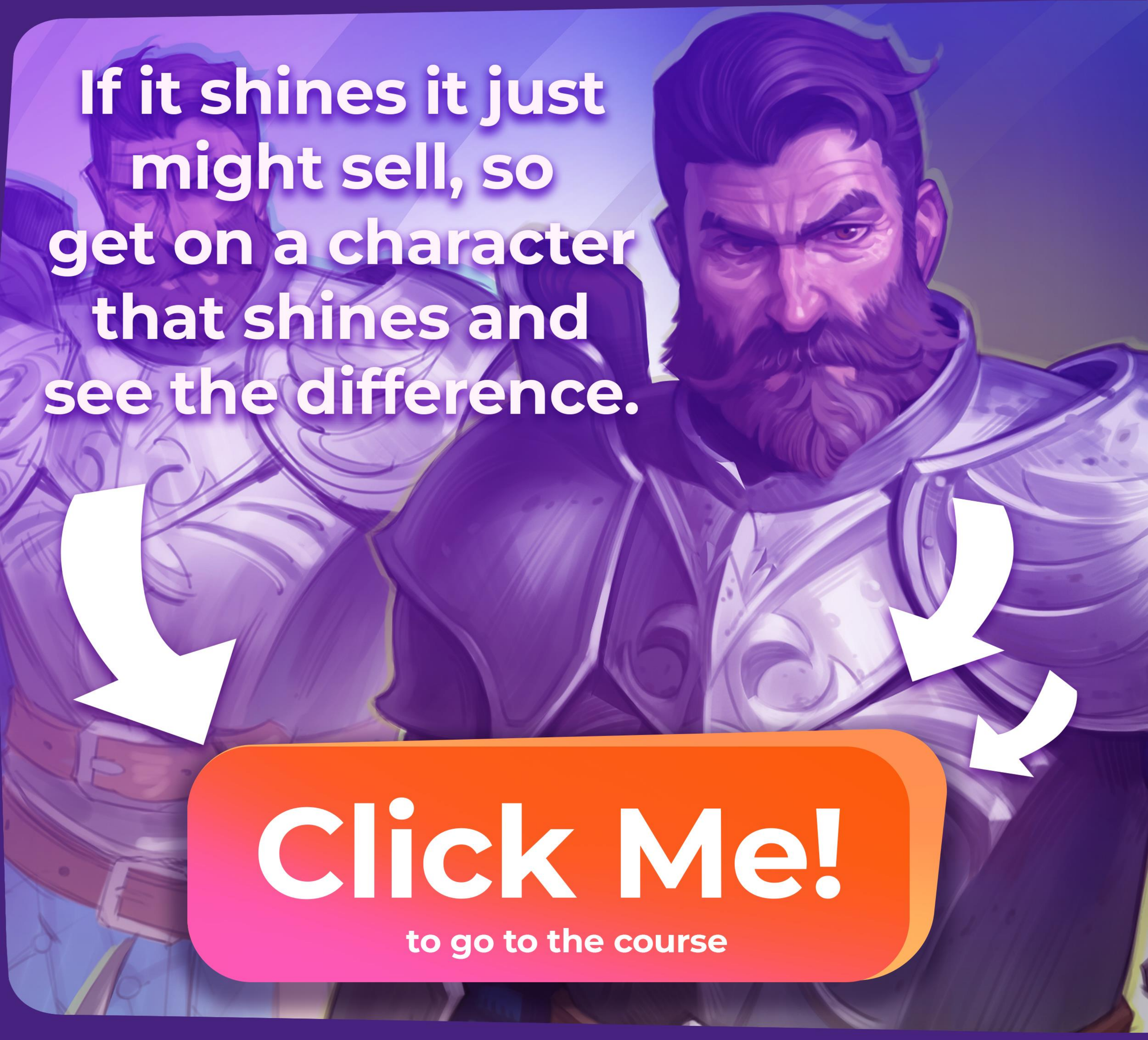

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Practice Tips (1/3)

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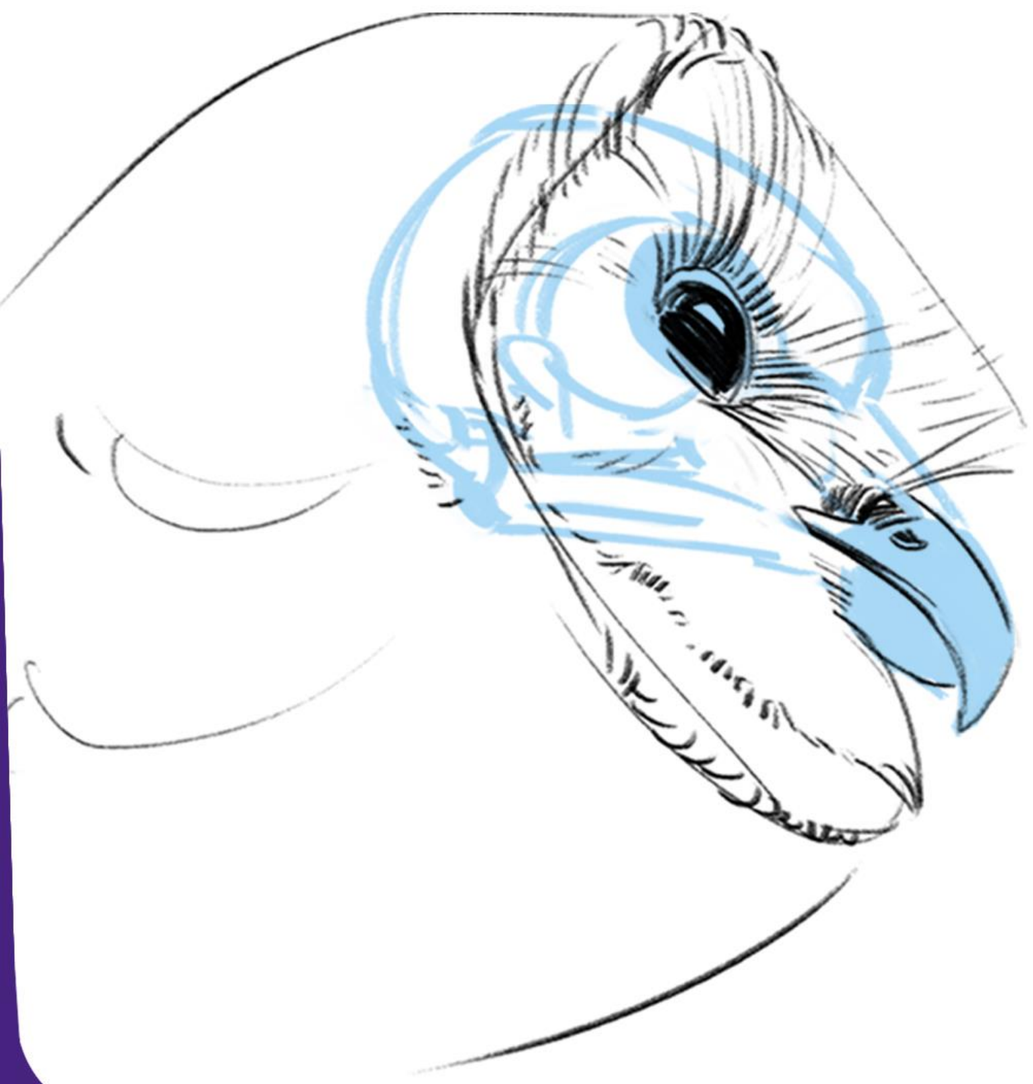
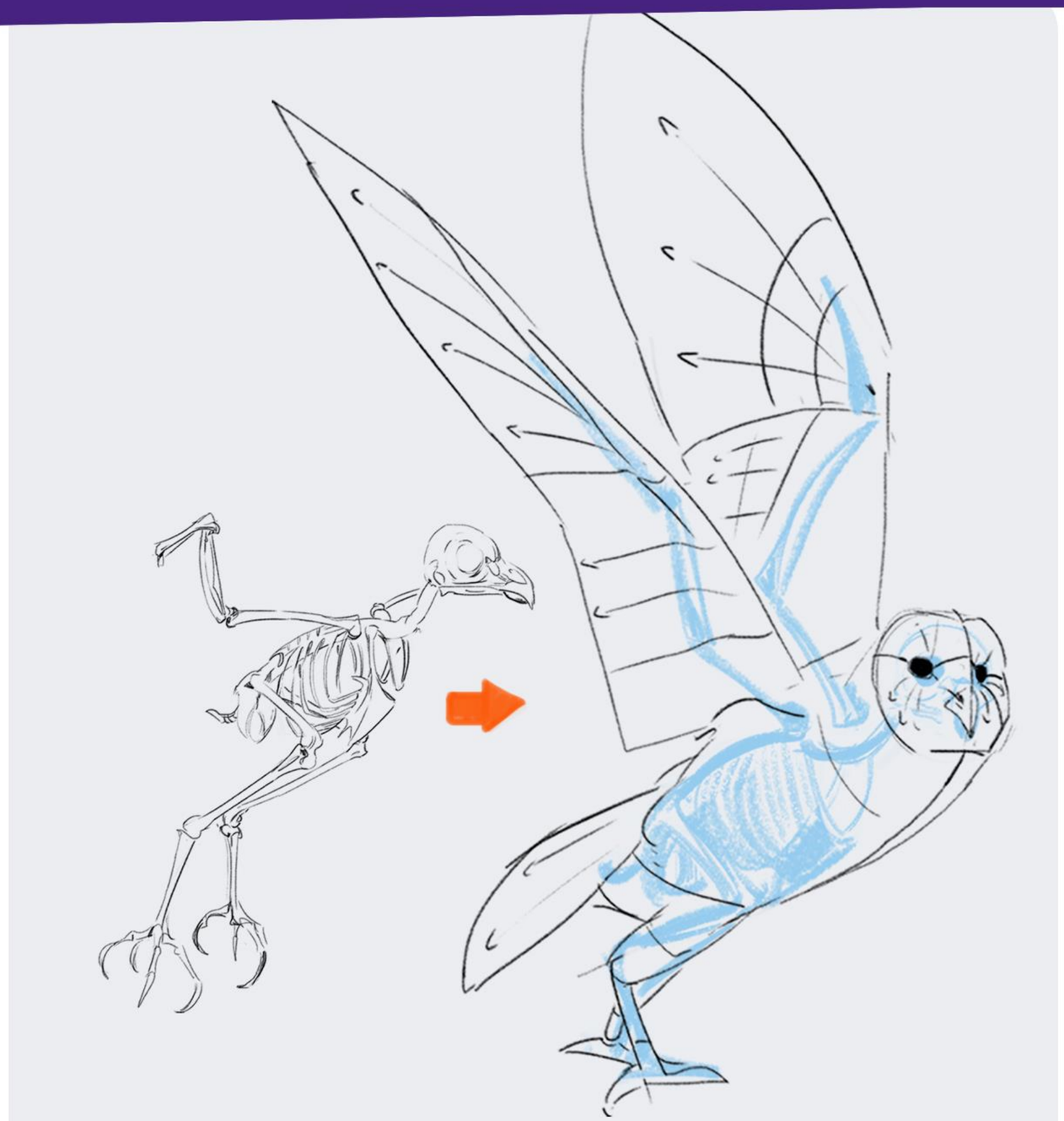
Practice Tips

We need to understand the underlying structure of what we want to draw or paint.

This helps us gain more insight from references, and gives us the ability to sketch a subject freely.





Both **anatomical understanding** and **simplified structure** are important to confidently sketch and paint a desired subject.

Proportions and the placement of features do not need to be guessed. They are often based on the skeletal structure underneath, even if it hidden by flesh or feathers.

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Practice Tips (3/3)

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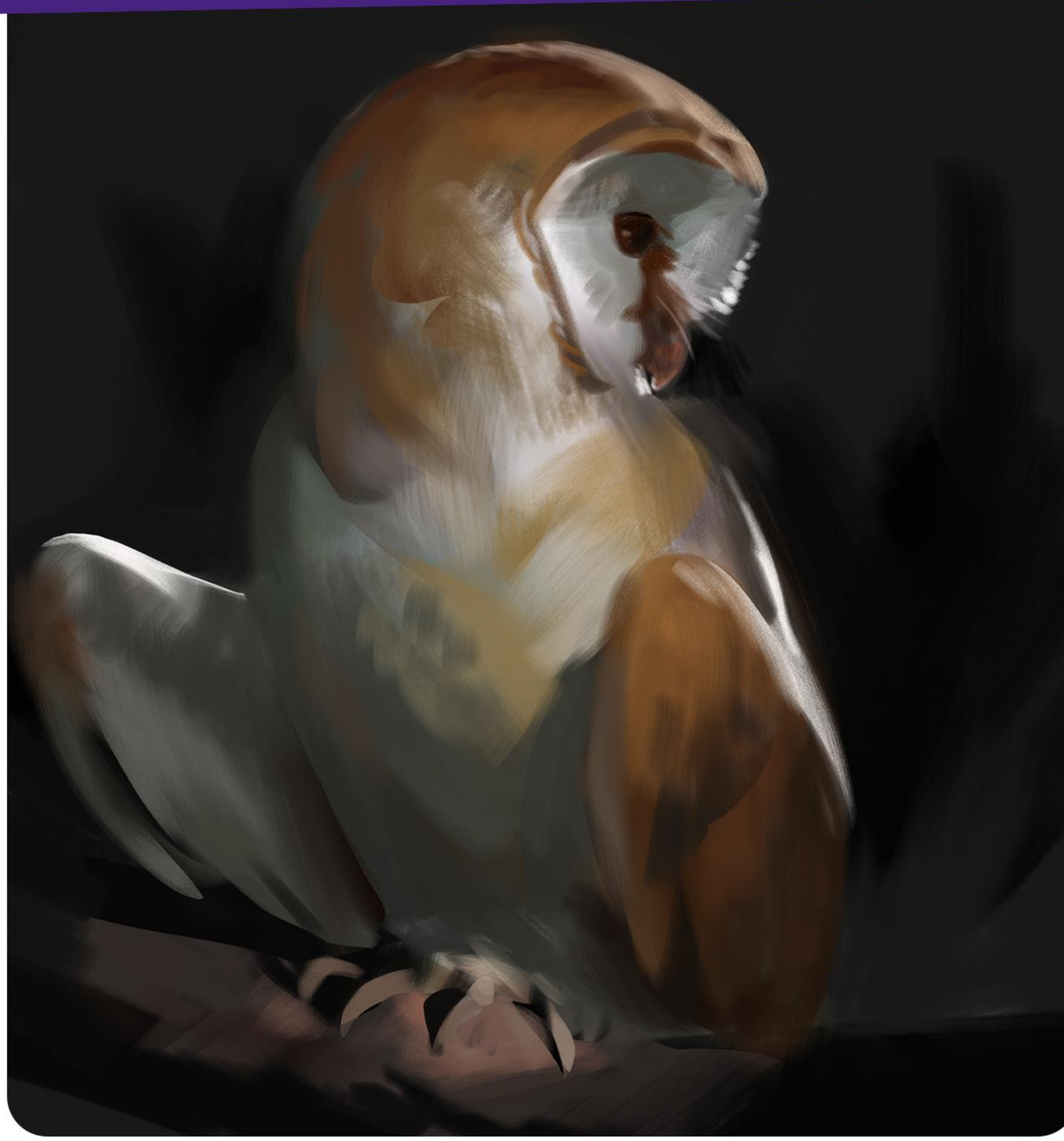
Structure is a crucial component when we want to add light to a subject.
Even complex forms can be simplified into an arrangement of flat planes. These will be lighter or darker, depending on their orientation towards, or away from a light source.



Simplifying a form can happen directly on the canvas, or in our minds. The purpose is to avoid getting distracted by details, texture, etc. - and instead to look for the important shapes and marks which create the illusion of form, depth, and light.

Hybrid Line-Painting Method

Visign Cheat Sheets : Fundamentals

Hybrid Line-Painting Method (2/4)

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Once we have that, we can start adding lines to define the forms. This is just the start!

We can start with some loose paint strokes to get a vague idea of the subject we want to create. If we're making a portrait, we can pick some flesh tones and begin with the local colors.

There is a method to this madness!

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Hybrid Line-Painting Method (3/4)

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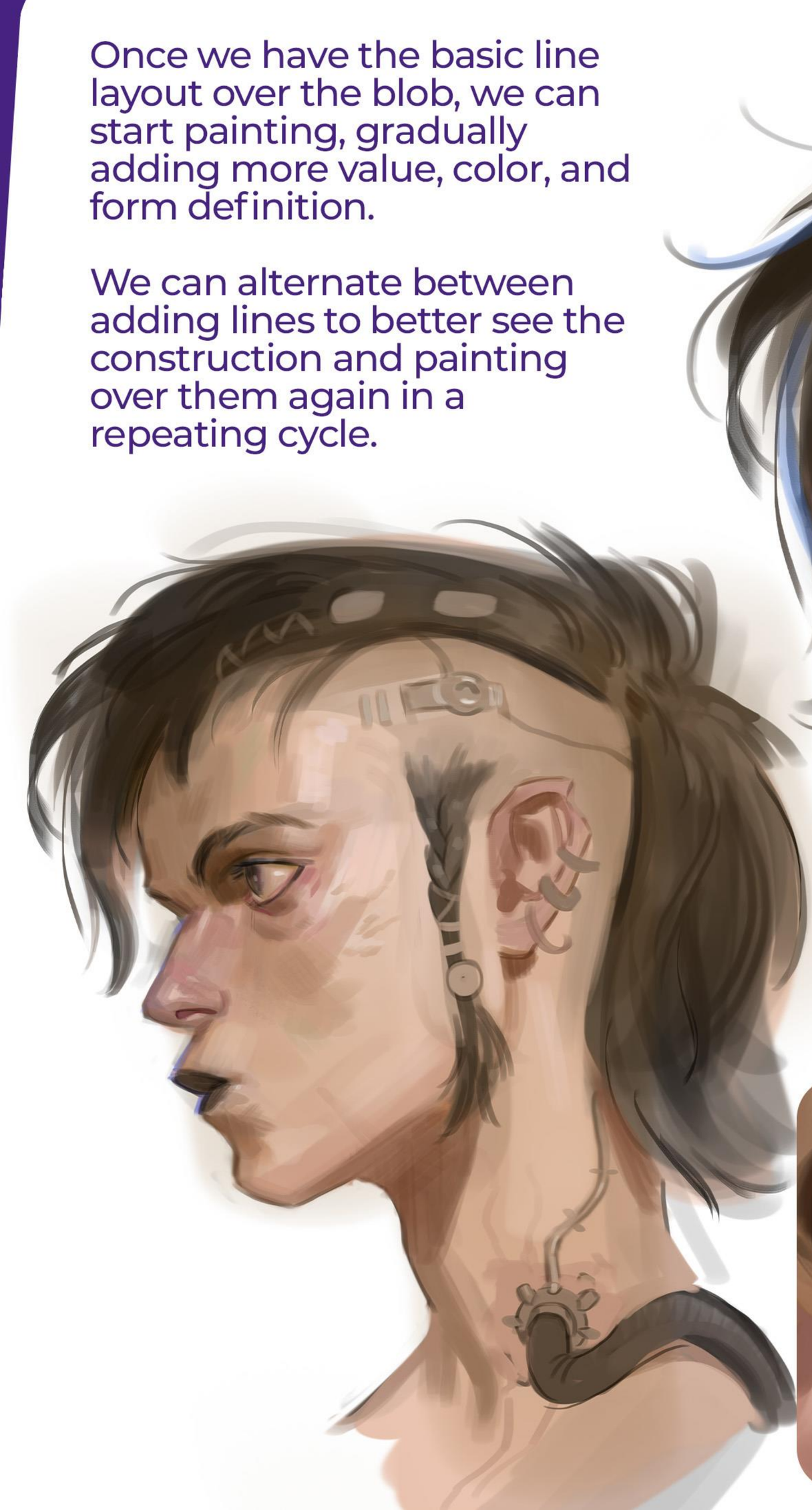
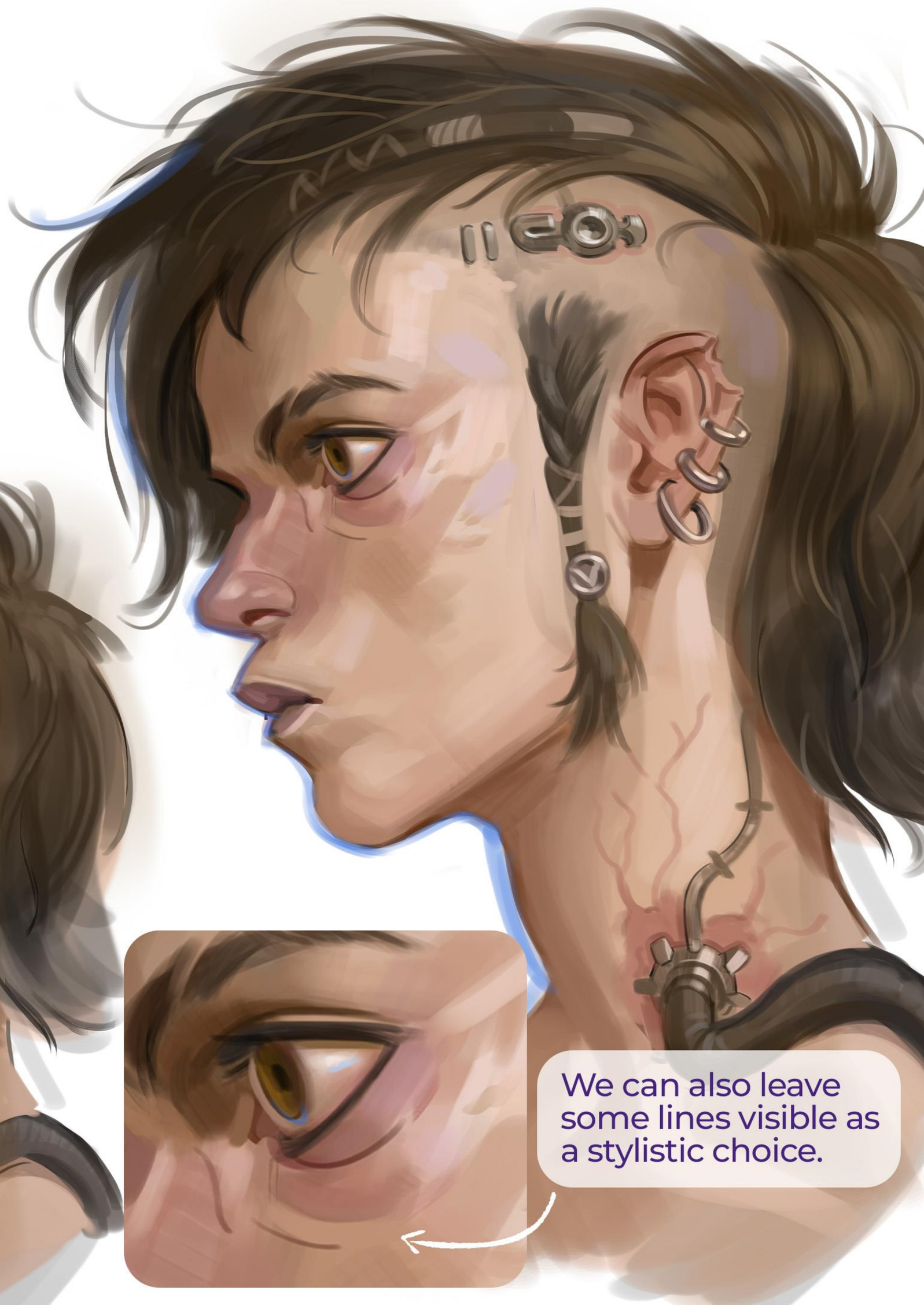
Once we have the basic line layout over the blob, we can start painting, gradually adding more value, color, and form definition.

We can alternate between adding lines to better see the construction and painting over them again in a repeating cycle.





We can also leave some lines visible as a stylistic choice.

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Hybrid Line-Painting Method (4/4)

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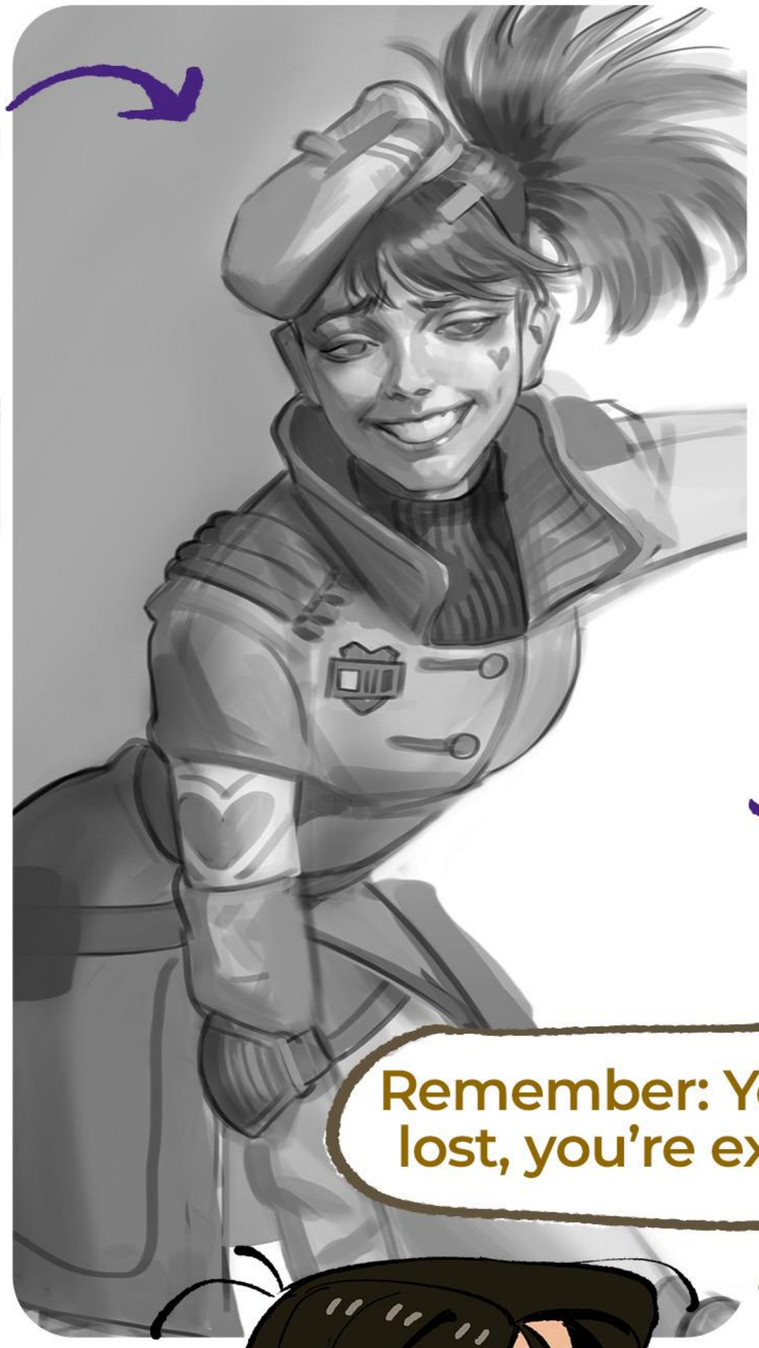

This loose painting method can feel chaotic for some, but it's also very liberating.

The challenge lies in balancing silhouette, shape, construction, and values all at once.

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Painting a Dragon

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Painting a Dragon (2/4)

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The line drawing establishes the **idea**, **composition**, **perspective**, **gesture**, and **expression**.
The more elements are established in this stage of the artwork, the less we need to worry about them later.

Flat **local values** on different layers (dragon, rocks, sky)

Shadow layer set to "**multiply**" to establish light and **shadow**.

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Painting a Dragon (3/4)

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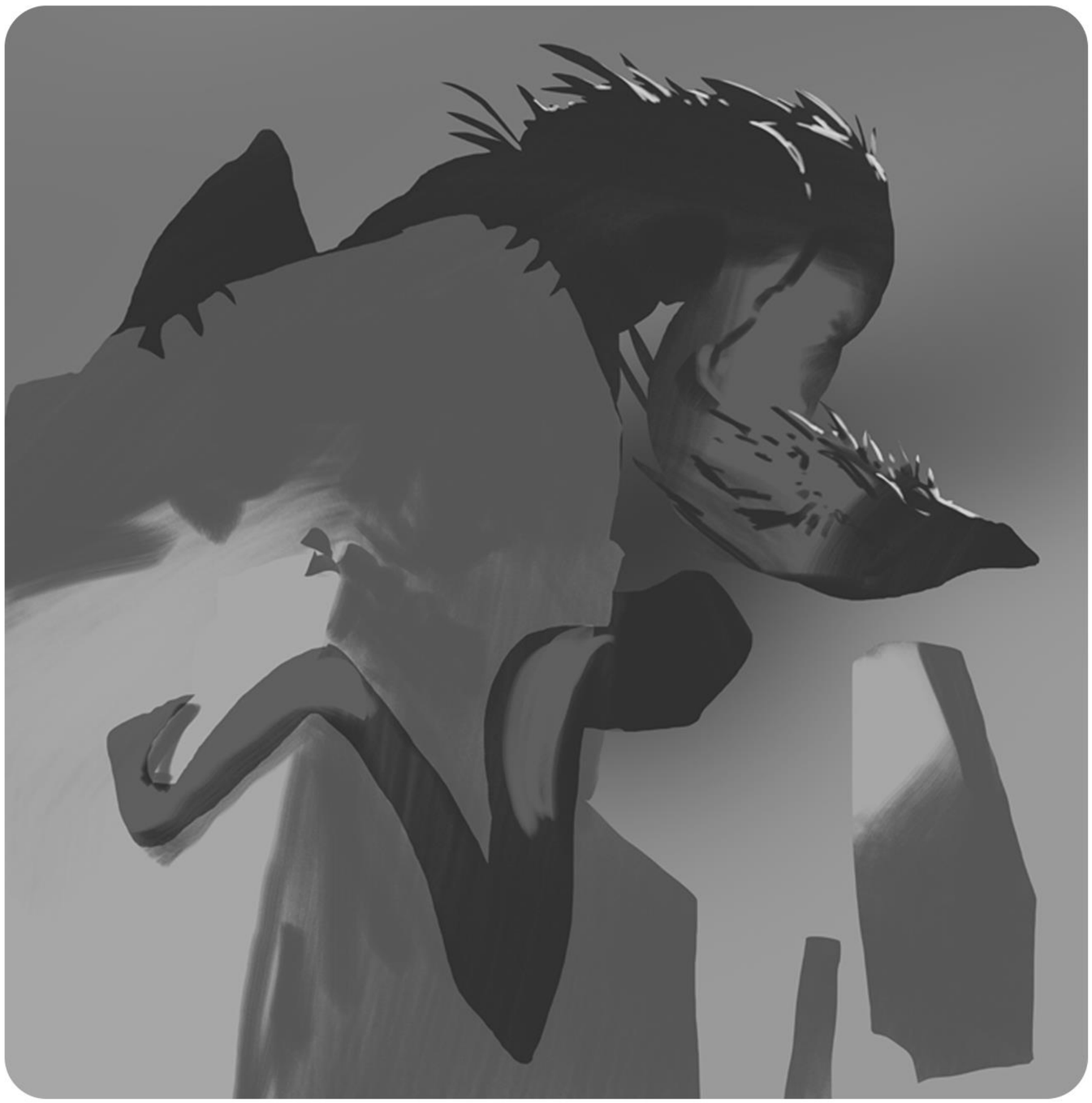

Value variation between groups needs to be greater than value variation within groups. This creates structure!

Use two values for each material to establish light and shadow while keeping the overall structure simple.

Exploring **light direction**, as well as different local values helps us find the most compelling value structure.

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Painting a Dragon (4/4)

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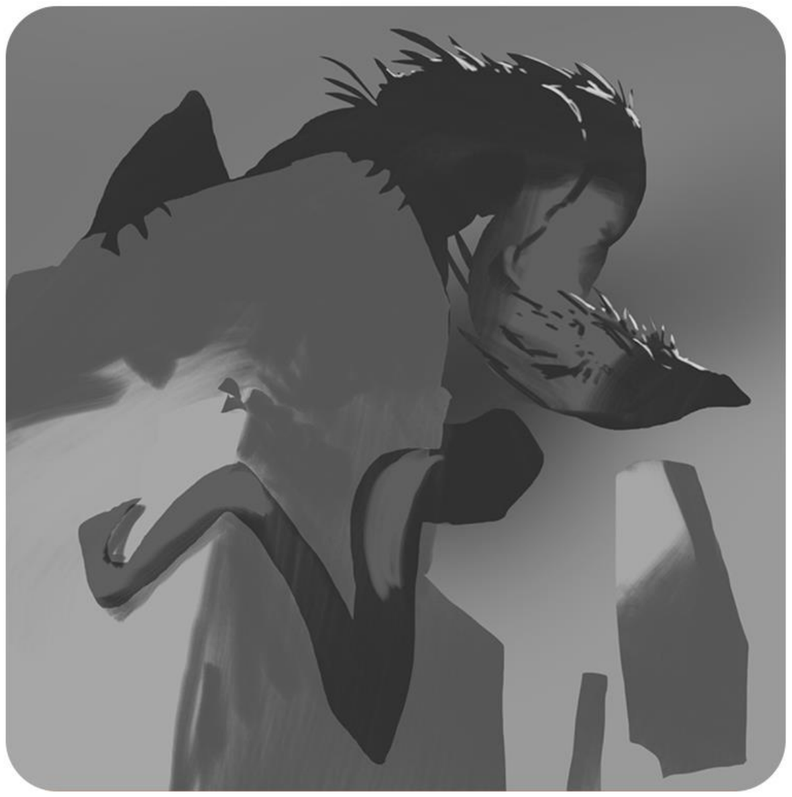

The **value brightness** can be adjusted easily using either **Curves** or **Levels** to make sure colors and light work well together.

Each grayscale layer is colored by using adjustments such as **Curves**, **Hue/Saturation**, and **Color Balance**.

See how to use adjustment layers to go from grayscale to color in this video

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Rim Light

Tips on lighting

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Rim Light (2/4)

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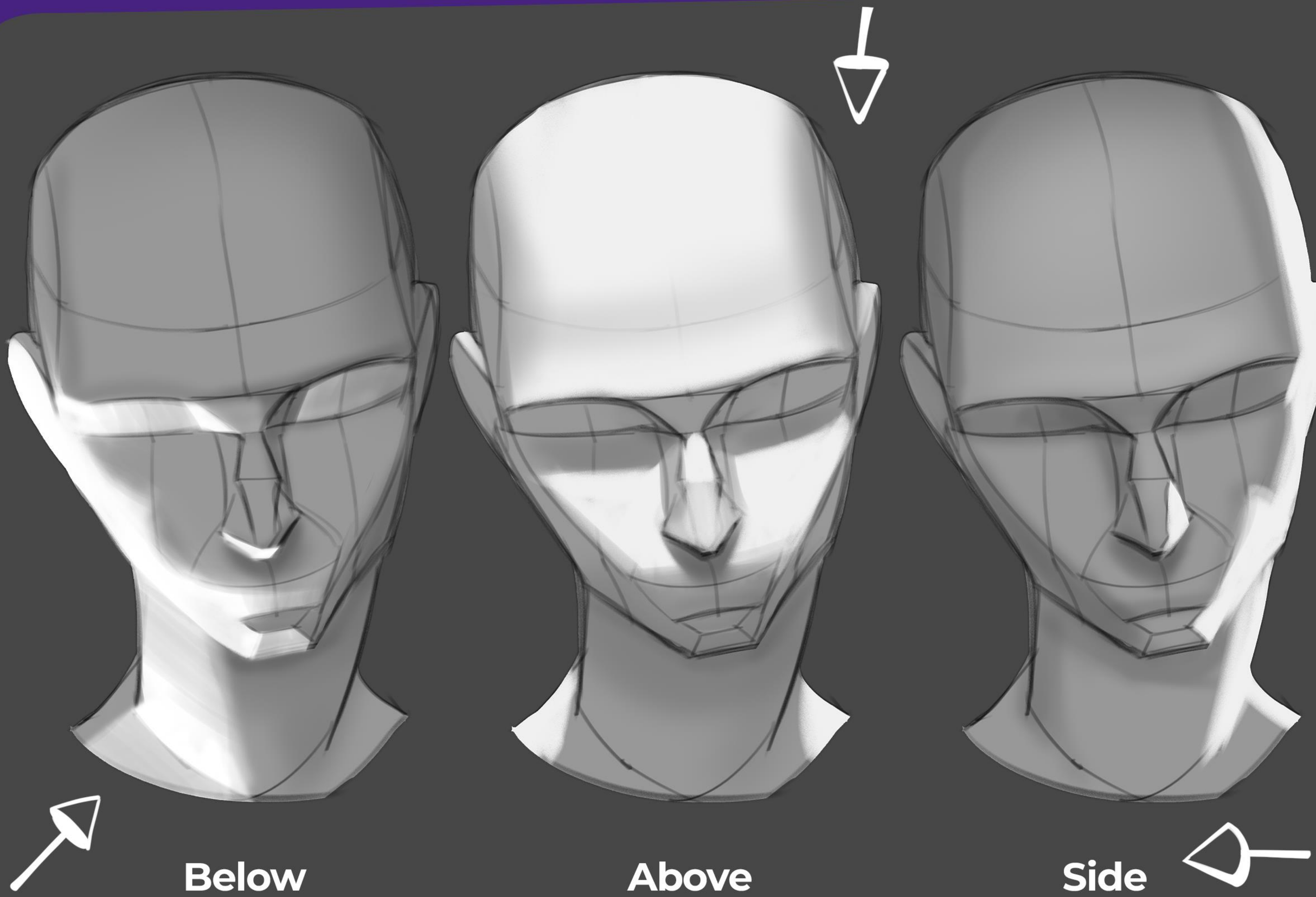

Rim light is technically another light source that interacts with an object's form, but it does so from behind or to the side. If we simplify the head into more manageable forms, we can add light from different angles to better understand how it interacts with the form – whether from underneath, above, or the side.

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Rim Light (3/4)

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If we paint a character as usual, but want to add more impact to the lighting, rim lighting is a great way to create a dramatic effect.
It's recommended to use a darker background and set the overall lighting of the character lower, so the rim light can pop out more.
Here, a multiply layer has been applied to prepare the character for the rim light.

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Rim Light (4/4)

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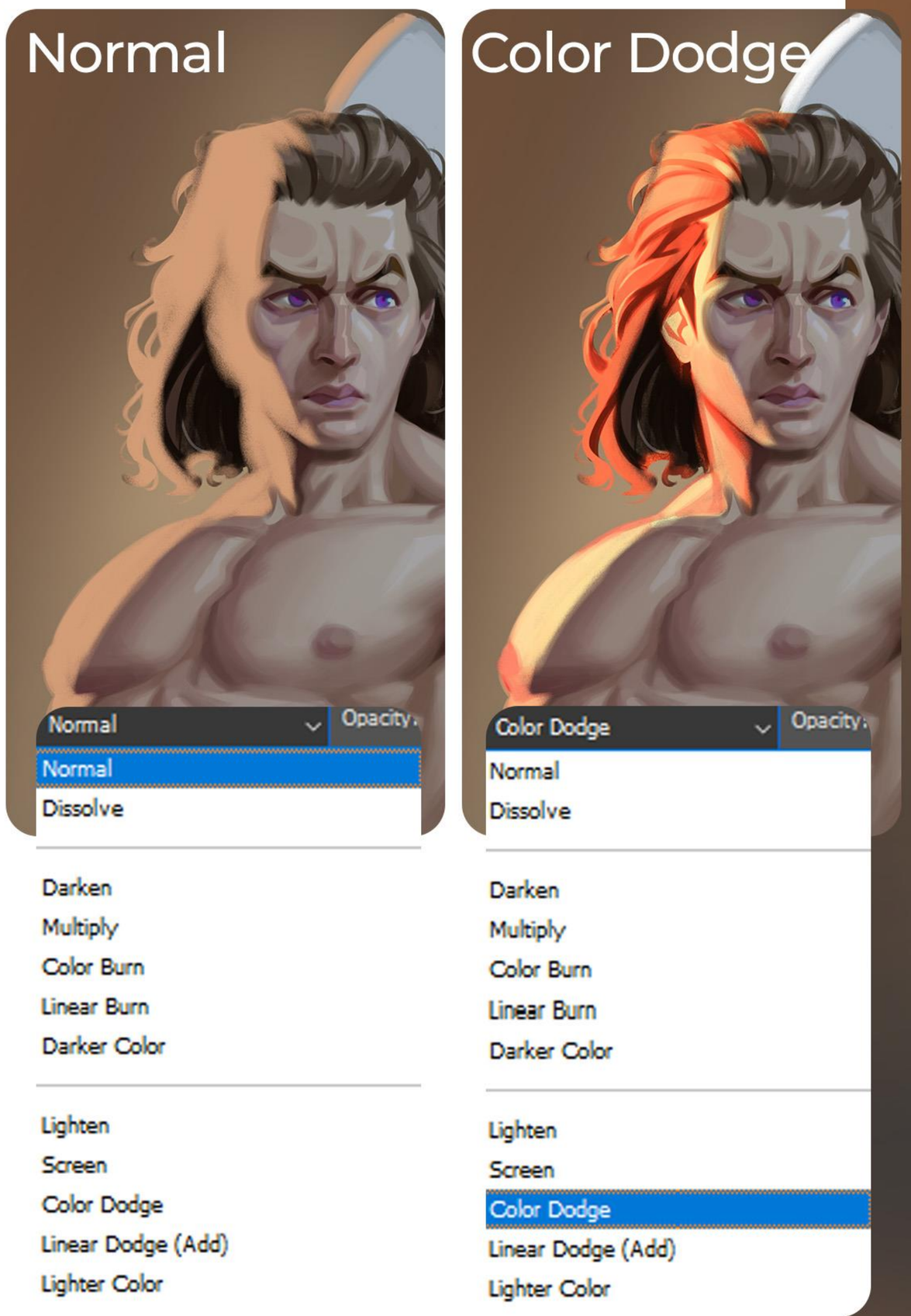

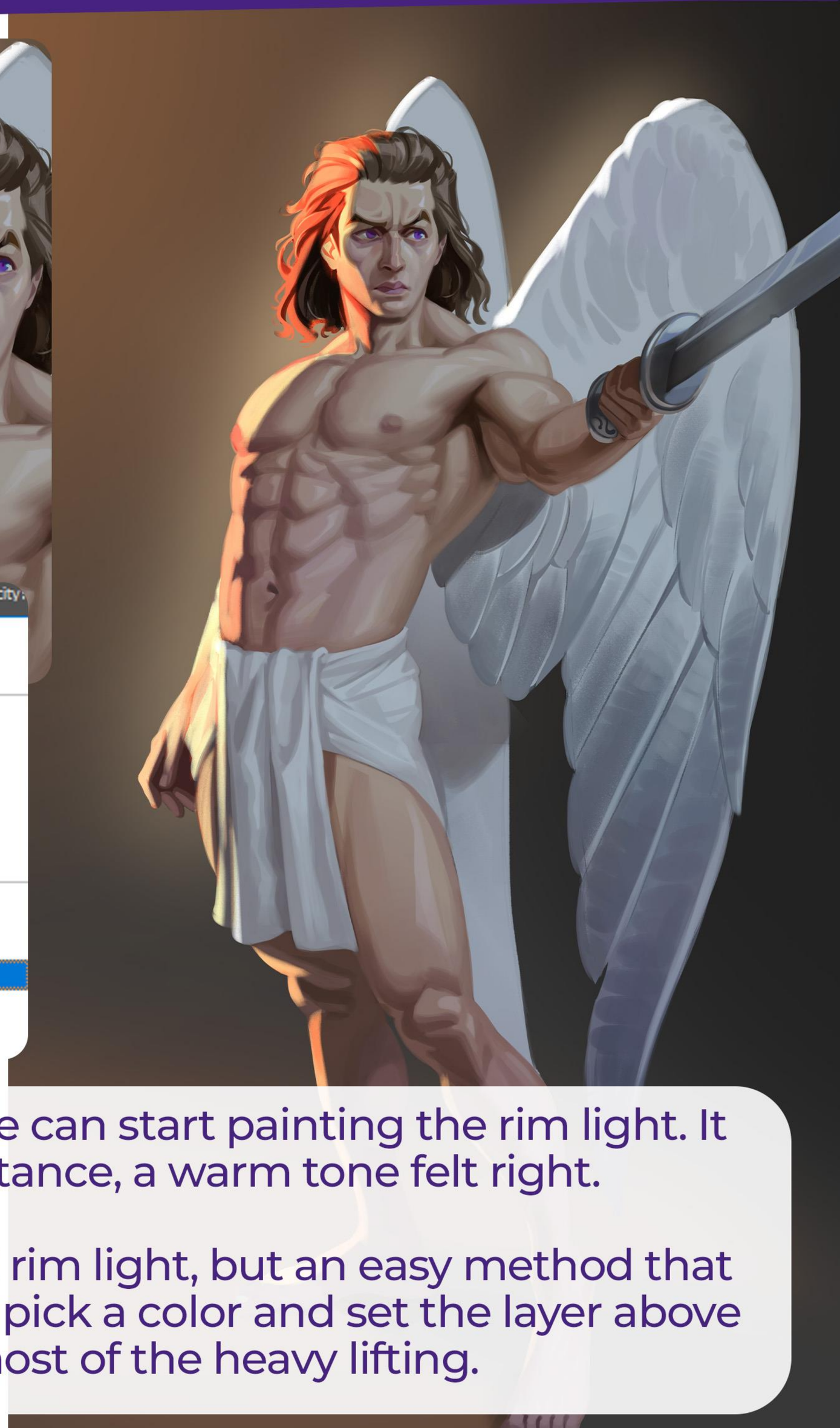

Once the character is set up, we can start painting the rim light. It can be any color, but in this instance, a warm tone felt right.

There are different ways to add rim light, but an easy method that requires minimal painting is to pick a color and set the layer above to 'Color Dodge'—this will do most of the heavy lifting.

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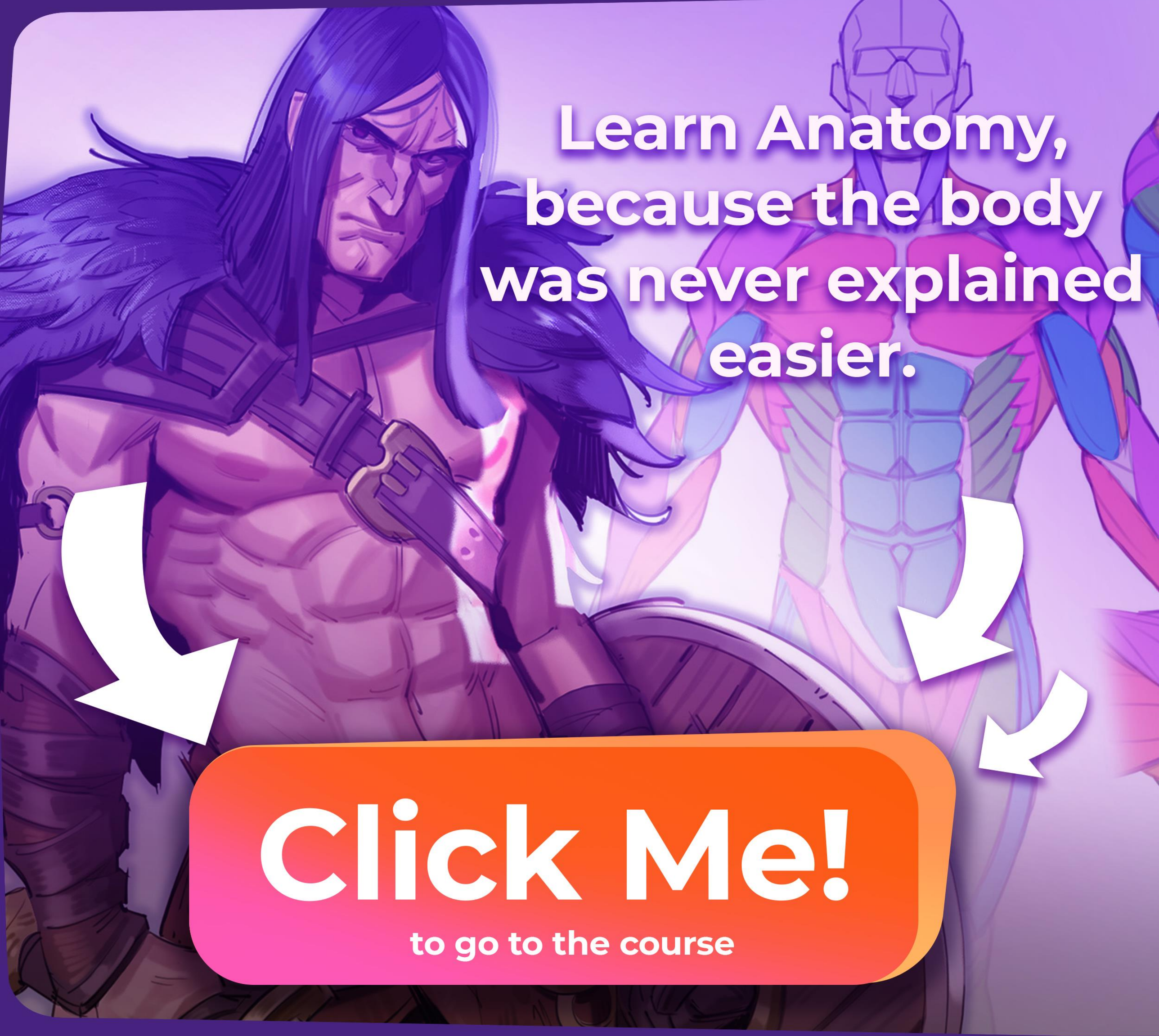

Lessons from a Misty Forest

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Misty Forest (2/3)

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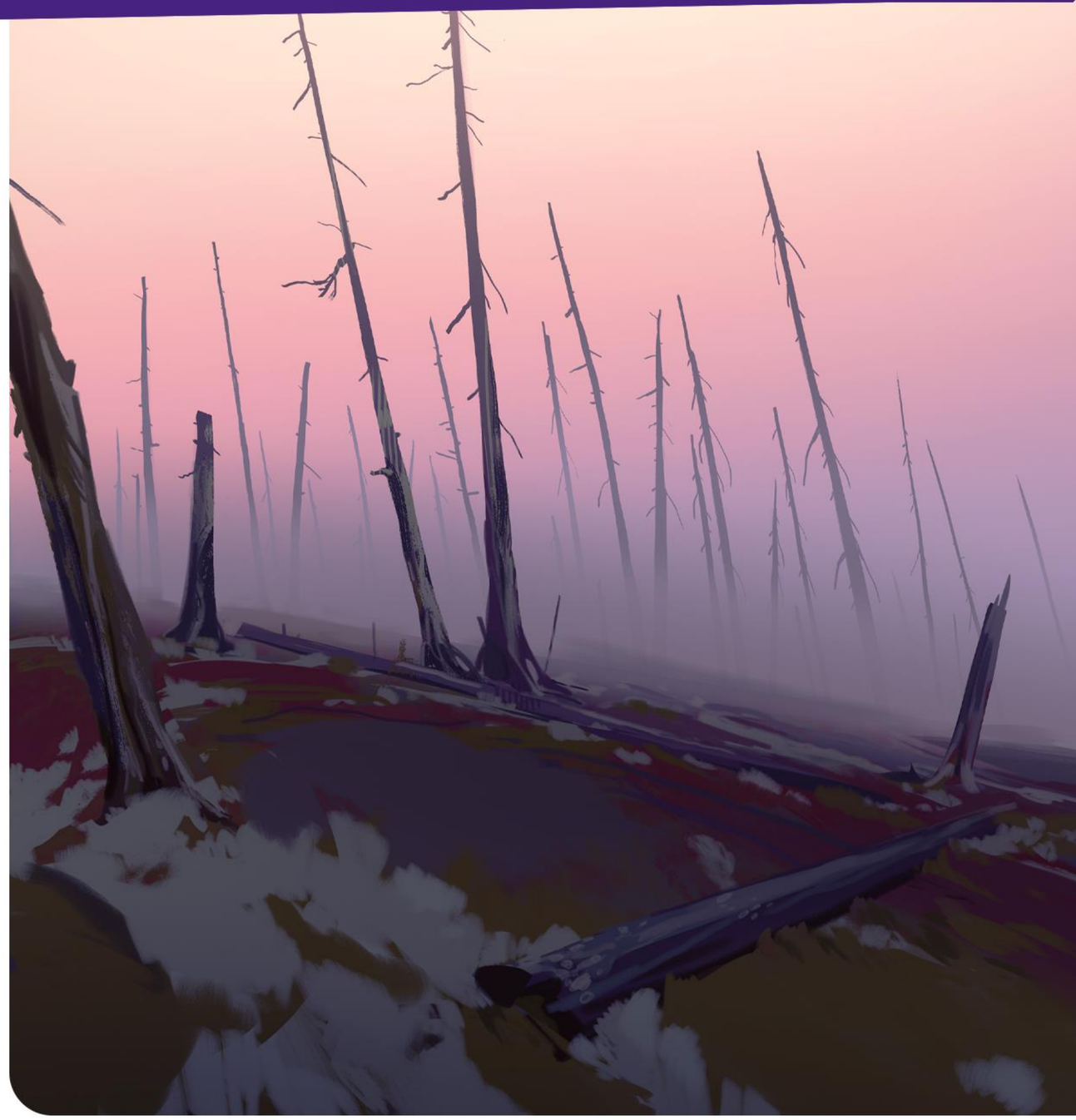
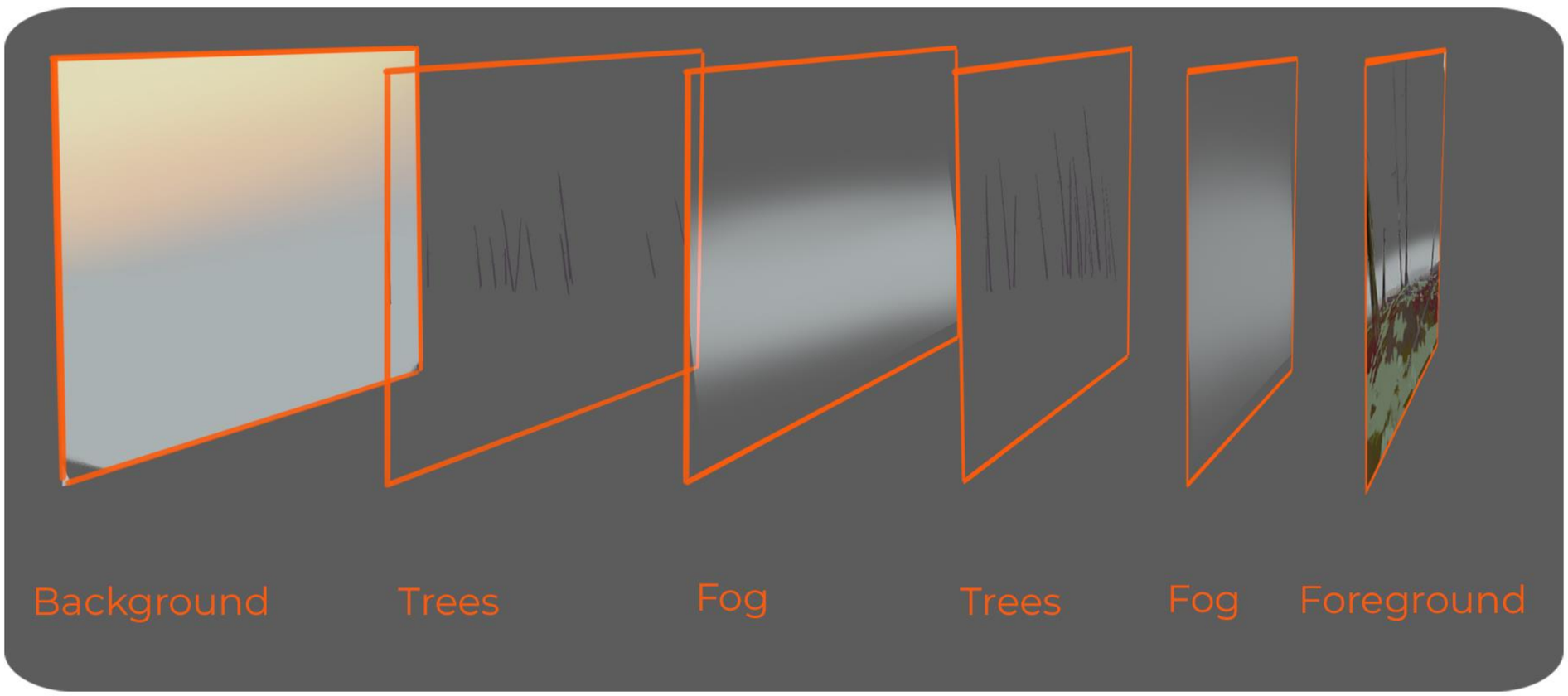
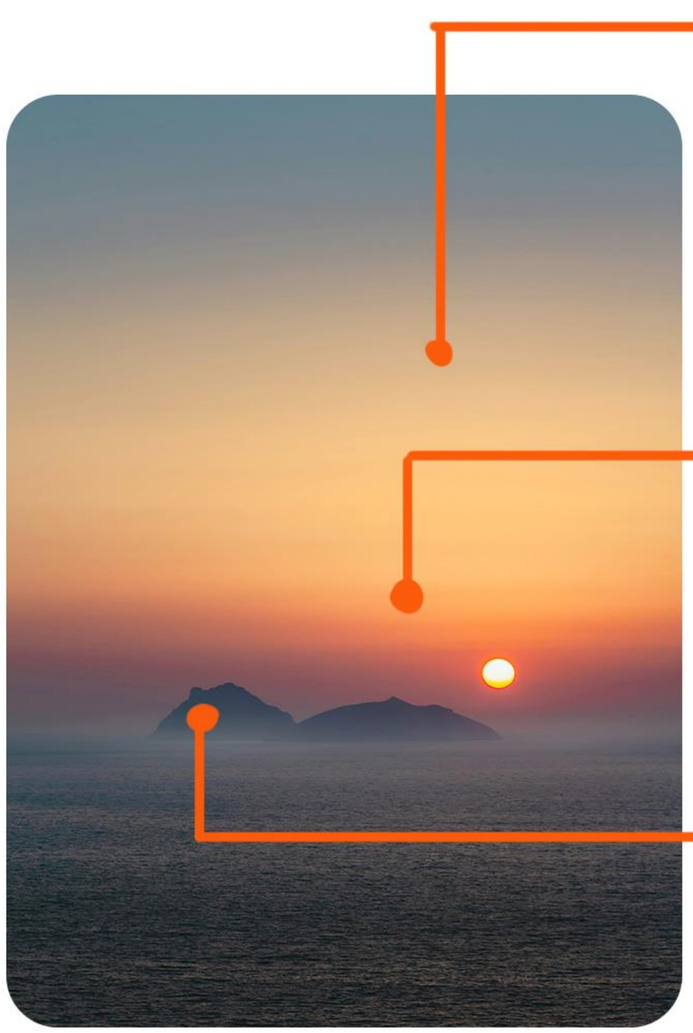
Overlap is one of the key principles in the layer structure of many digital artworks. The most bottom layer is furthest in the background, and the top layer is closest to the viewer.

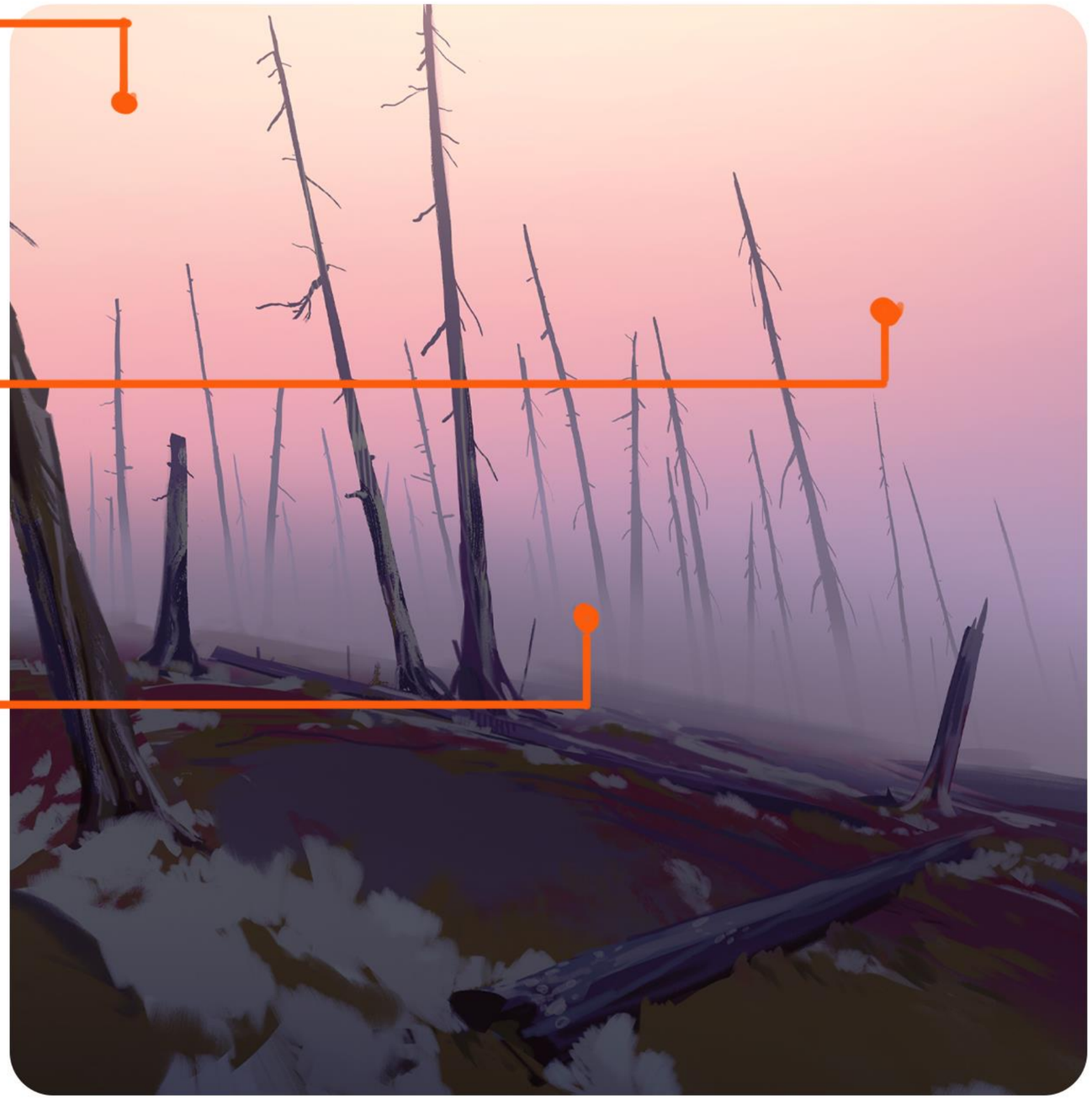


A well-structured layer system makes it easier to create and adjust depth. In this example, the fog is placed between multiple layers to create the effect of increasingly dense mist.



References help us create believable weather effects.
Analysing and understanding the mechanics of certain visual effects makes it possible to apply them to our own scenes, as well as amend them where necessary.





The same weather effect adjusted for a different scene.

Surface Application

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Surface Application (2/3)

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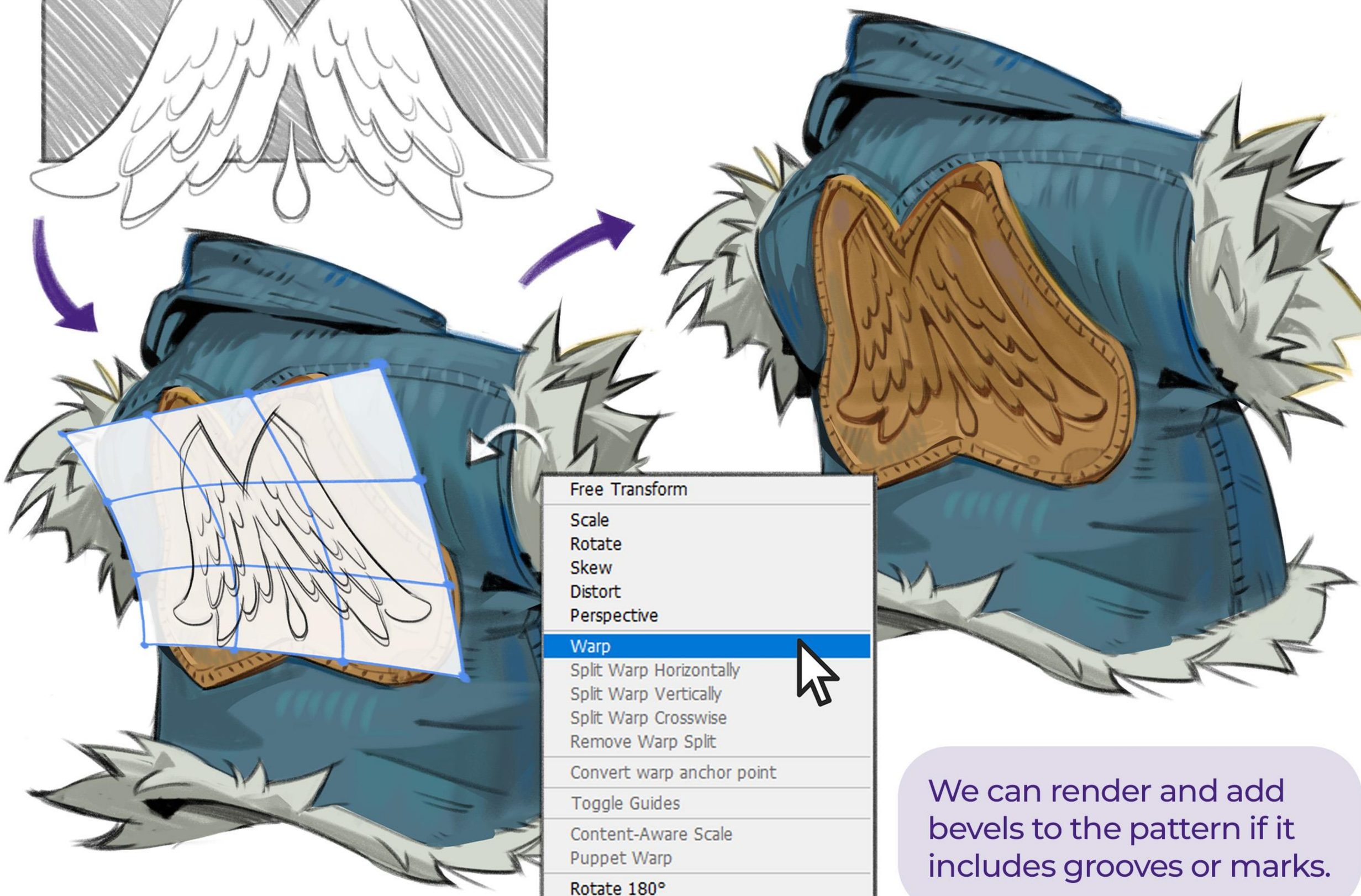
Pattern drawn and prepared to be mapped on the jacket

We can design a pattern, symbol, or artwork on a separate layer and then apply it to the surface of another object using transform tools, such as ***Distort*** and ***Warp***.



We can render and add bevels to the pattern if it includes grooves or marks.

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Surface Application (3/3)

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You can apply any pattern to any surface to add visual interest. It's easier if the surface is smooth or flat. Designs like tattoos are more challenging because some areas of the body can be bumpy or uneven, requiring you to repaint certain sections after warping the pattern into place.

Tattoo Design

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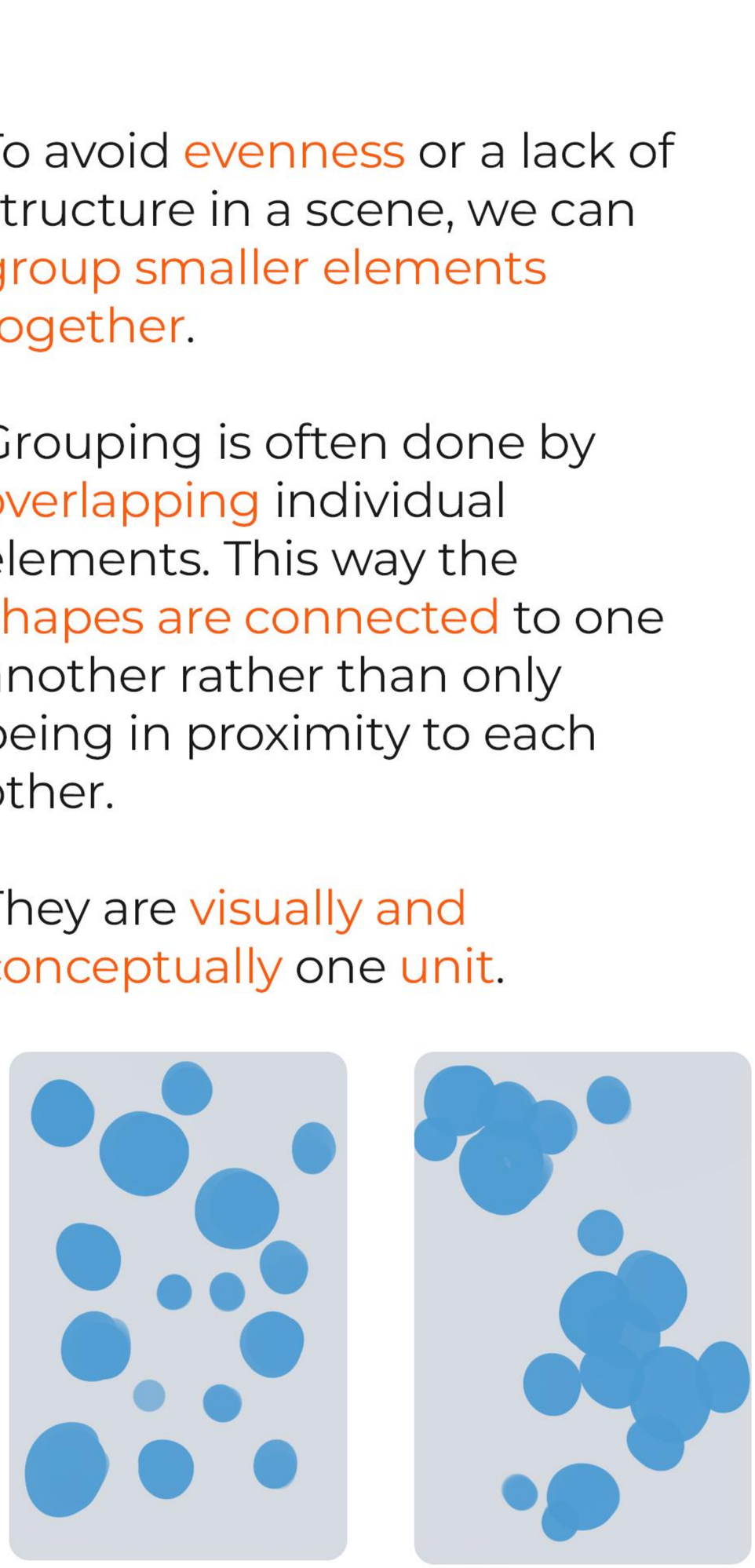
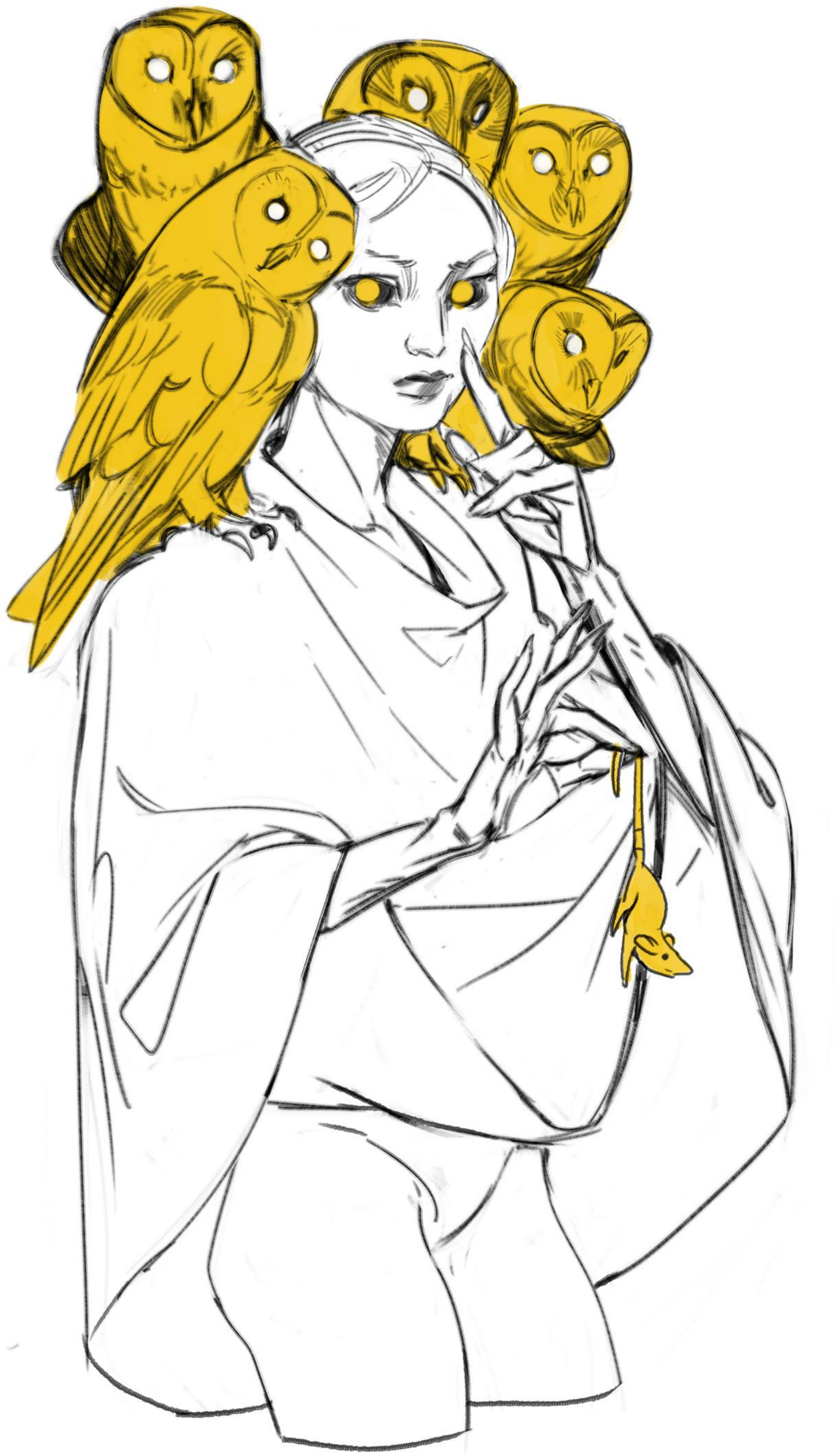
Grouping

To avoid evenness or a lack of structure in a scene, we can group smaller elements together.

Grouping is often done by overlapping individual elements. This way the shapes are connected to one another rather than only being in proximity to each other.

They are visually and conceptually one unit.





Gesture can also help unify a group. Lines and shapes placed against the flow draw attention.

Elements separated from a group also draw attention. While the group can be seen as one element, anything separate from it will stand out.

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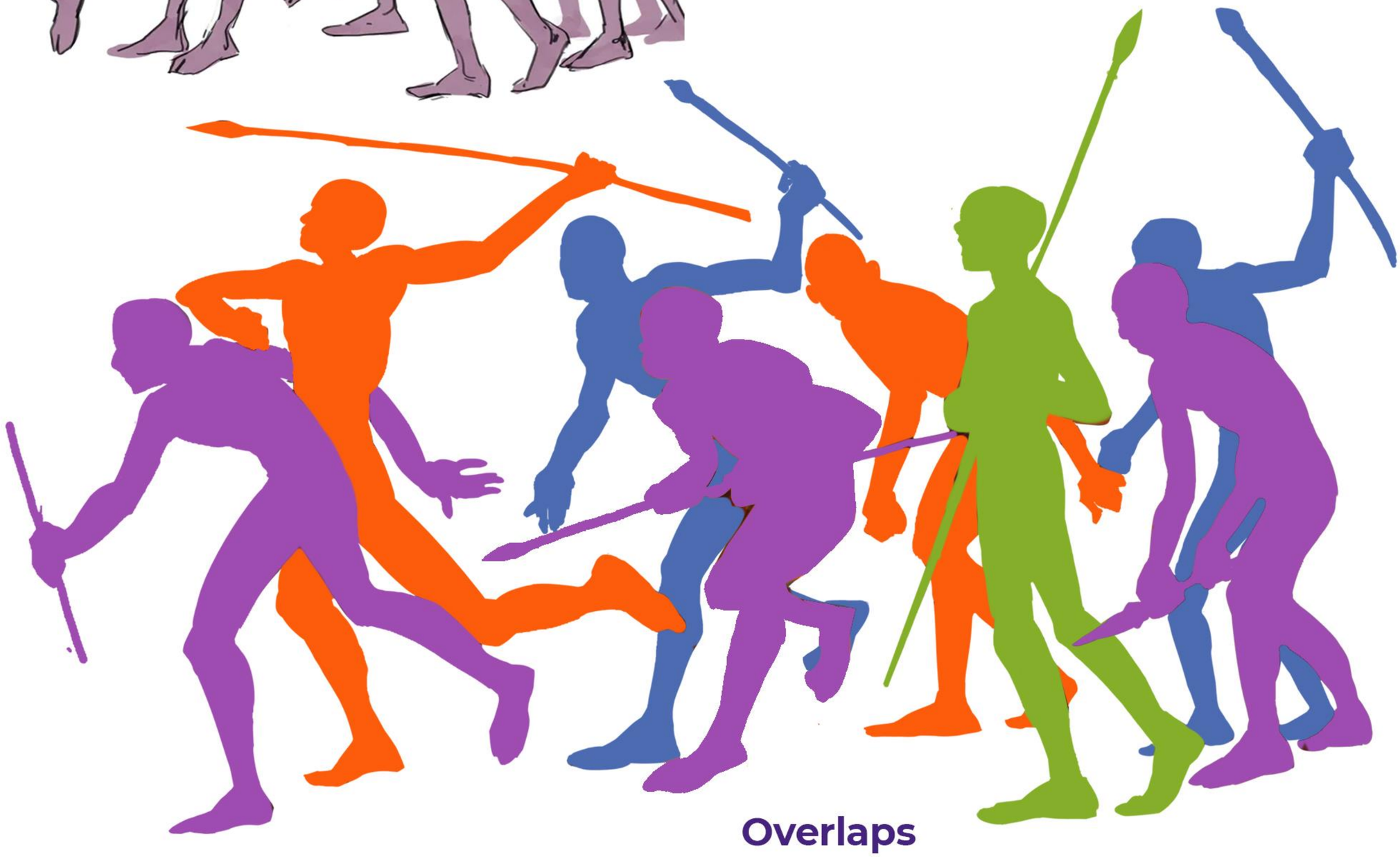
Tribalism

Tips on Movement and Overlap

Sketch to get the feel of the crowd

Sketch



Overlaps

Creating separation in this scenario becomes important - dynamism is key, especially for how we try to depict movement.

Let us go into Movement

Think about Movement as in how it works if it starts circulating, and it starts to have a flow that is continuous.

Creating opposition within the existing overlaps - is one important area to pay attention to. Keeping ratios within proportion is also important.

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Tribalism (4/4)

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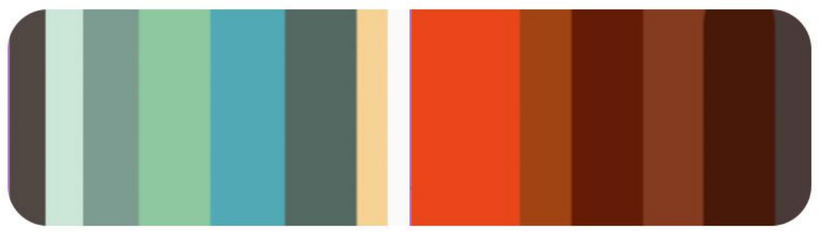
Keep in mind simple parts of the process:

1. Sketch (build your sketch, pay attention to main key proportions and movement).
2. Build a color palette - paint with simple flat colors.
3. Adjust components as you go - keep flow.

Colors



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Size Contrast (1/4)

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Size Contrast

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Size Contrast (2/4)

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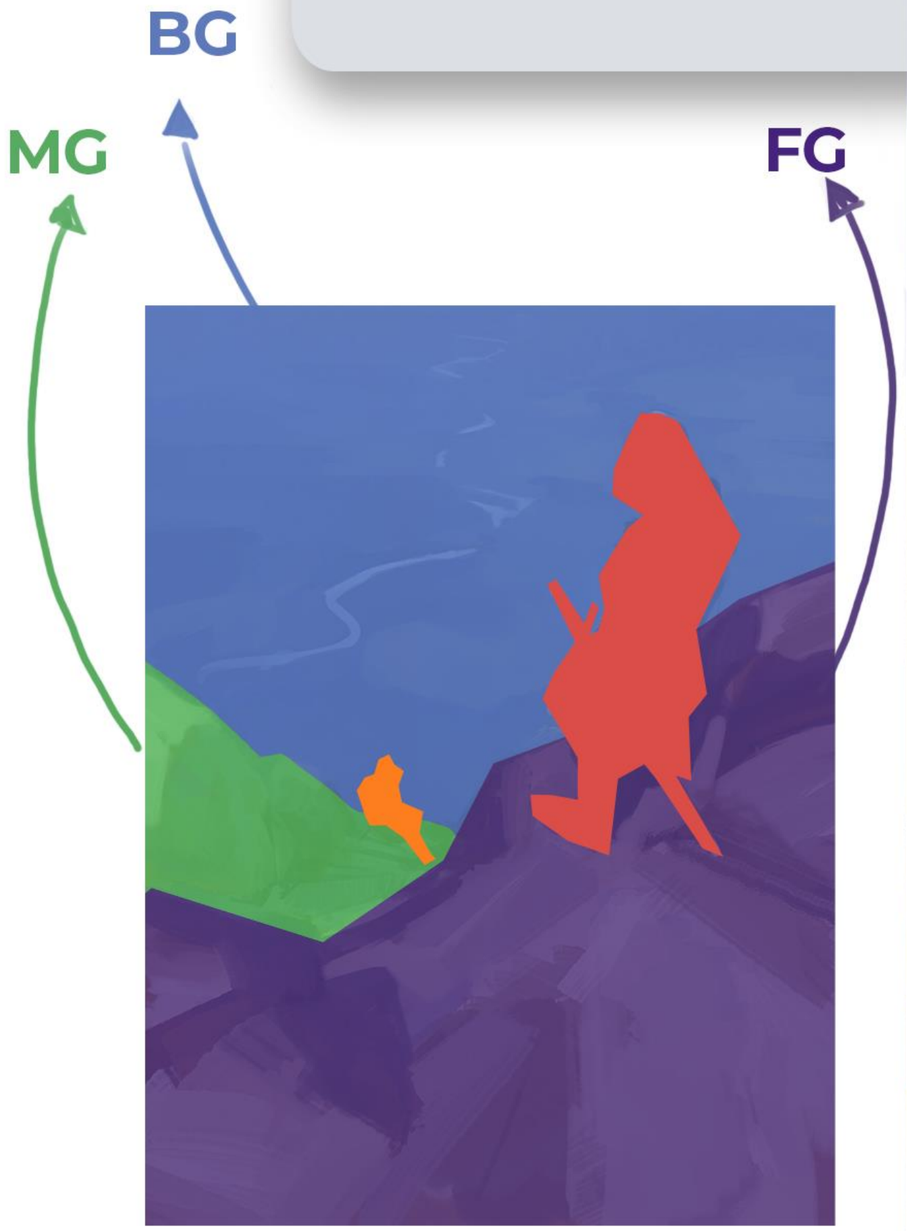
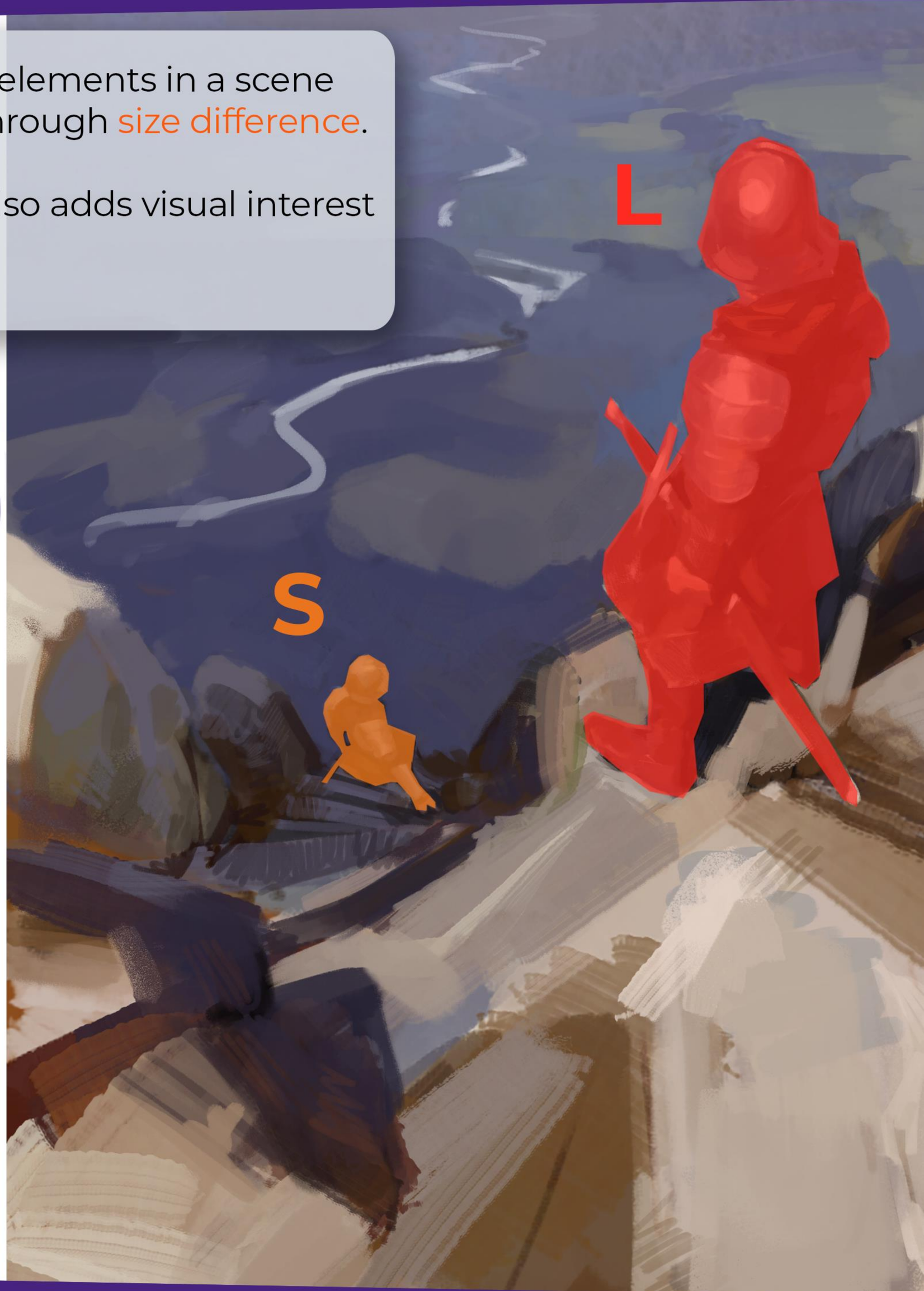
Repeating similar elements in a scene can imply depth through size difference.

The size contrast also adds visual interest to a composition.



Repeated elements also help tie different levels of depth together.



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Size Contrast (3/4)

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Details established in the foreground characters can be implied in the background figures.

This helps us manage detail distribution without painting minuscule elements in the background.

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Size Contrast (4/4)

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Size contrast can help heighten conflict in a scene. A larger than life foe makes a fight more dramatic.

Depth is also shown here through repeating figures in the foreground, midground, and background.

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Organic Shapes (1/3)

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Organic Shapes

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Organic Shapes (2/3)

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Big, **Medium**, **Small** is a key principle in the arrangement of these rocks

Organic elements come in all shapes and sizes and can be treated as abstract shapes.

Design limitations (e.g. anatomy, proportions, etc.) are less important for organic objects and we can use various design principles more freely.

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Organic Shapes (3/3)

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Painting every single leaf might not be necessary. We can group them together and **refining only in areas of focus**, our minds will **fill in the rest**.

Avoid distributing the details evenly, instead **group them together**.
This way we can create **areas of interest** as well as **areas of rest**.

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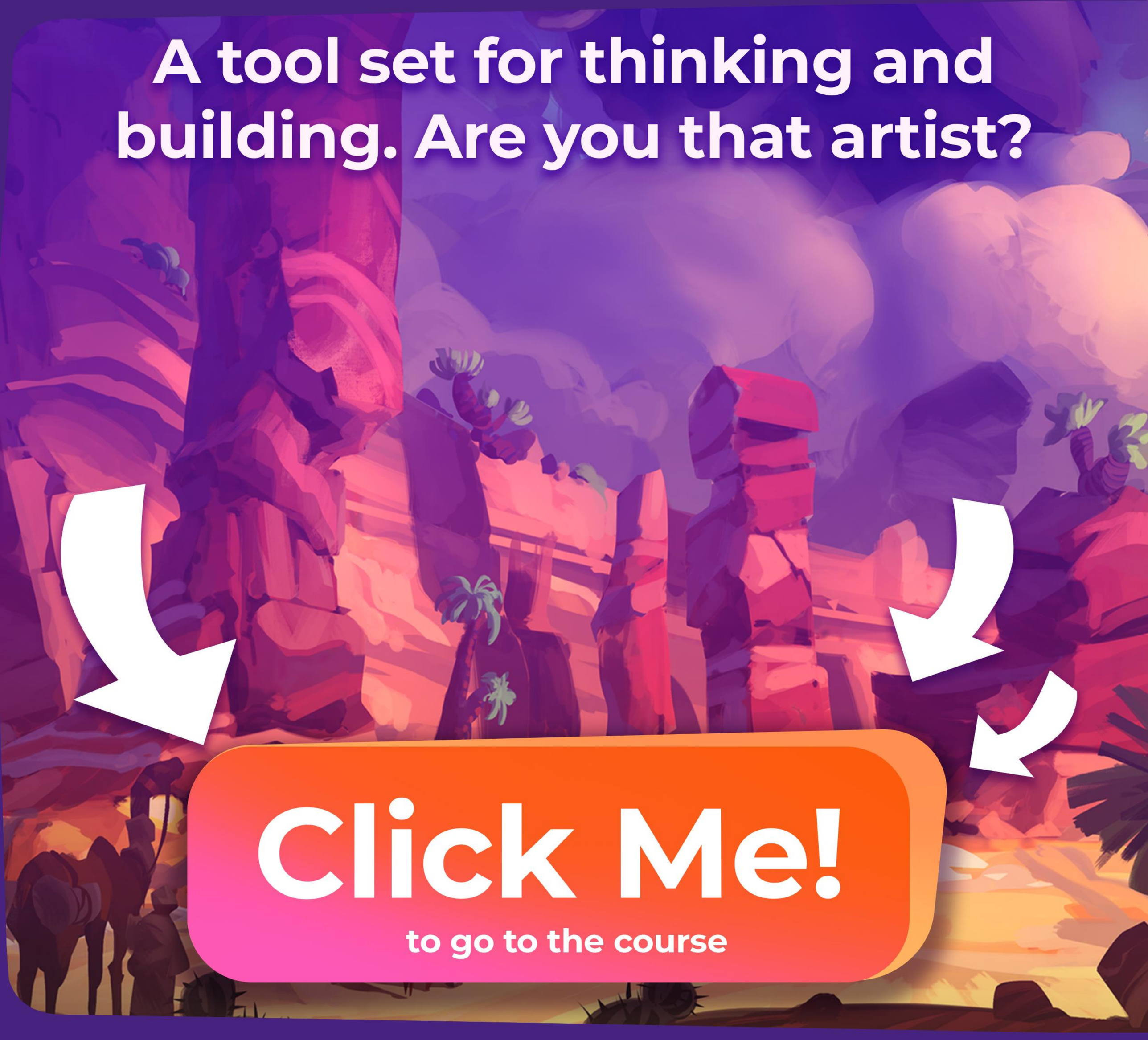

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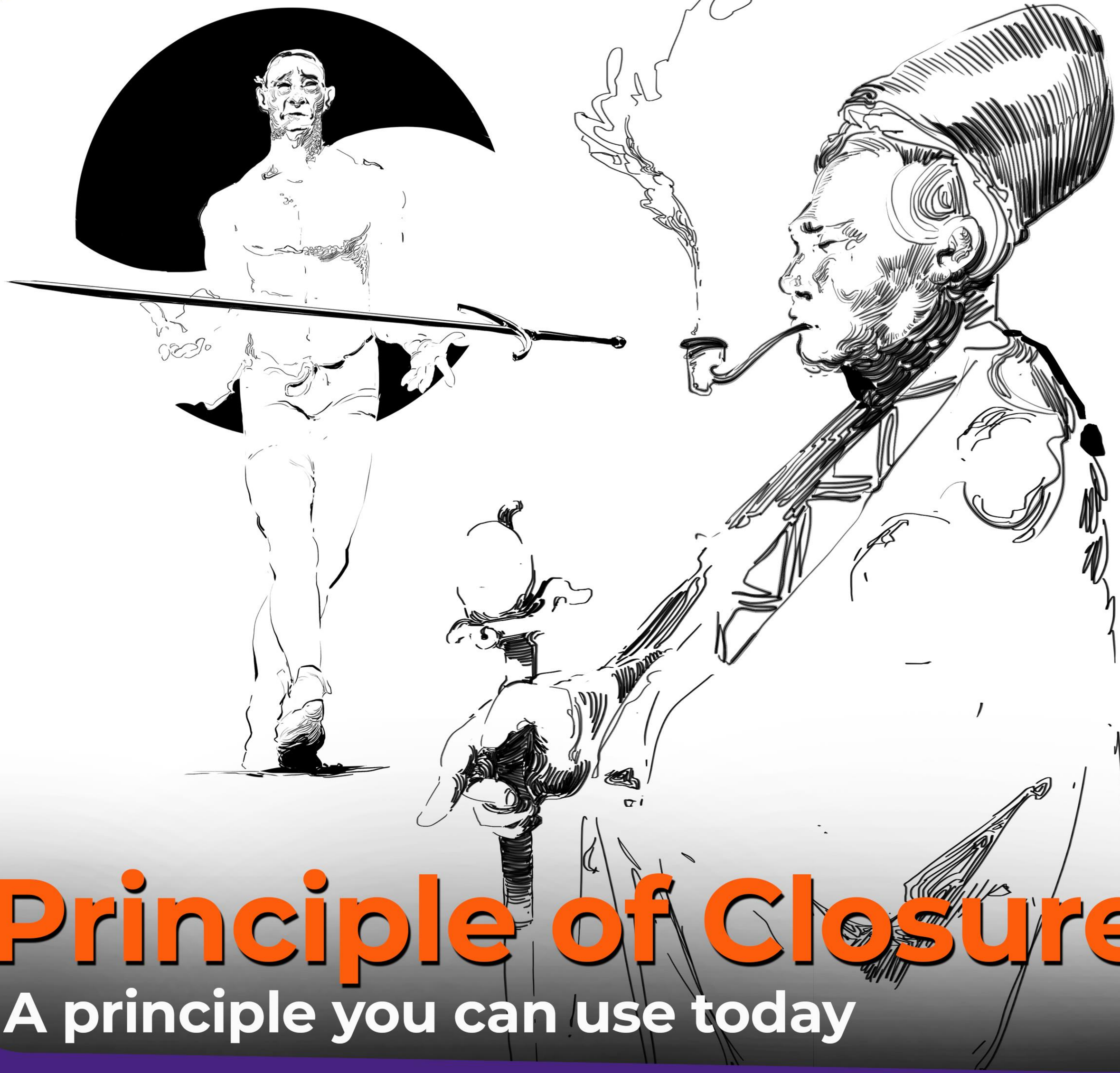
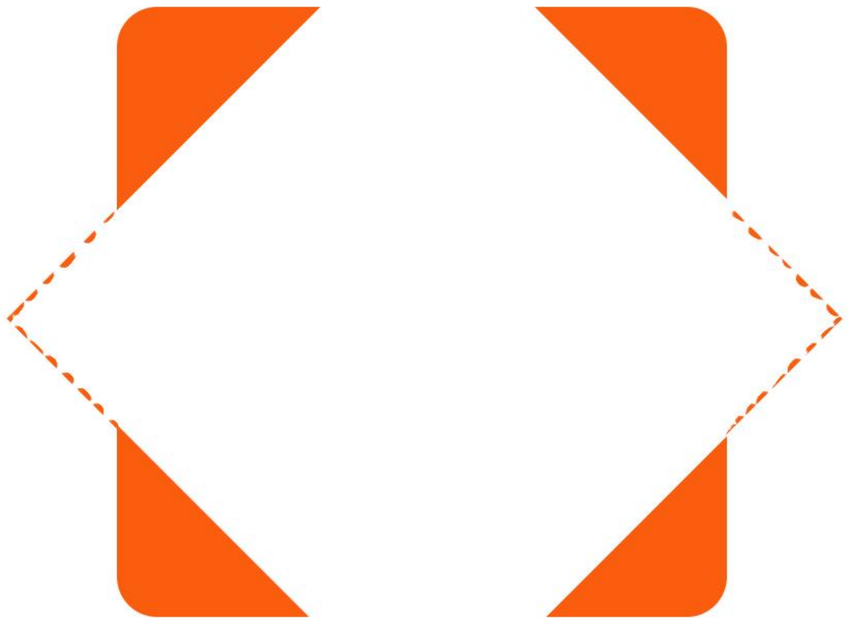


Principle of Closure

A principle you can use today

Definition

People will fill in blanks to perceive a complete object whenever an external stimulus partially matches that object



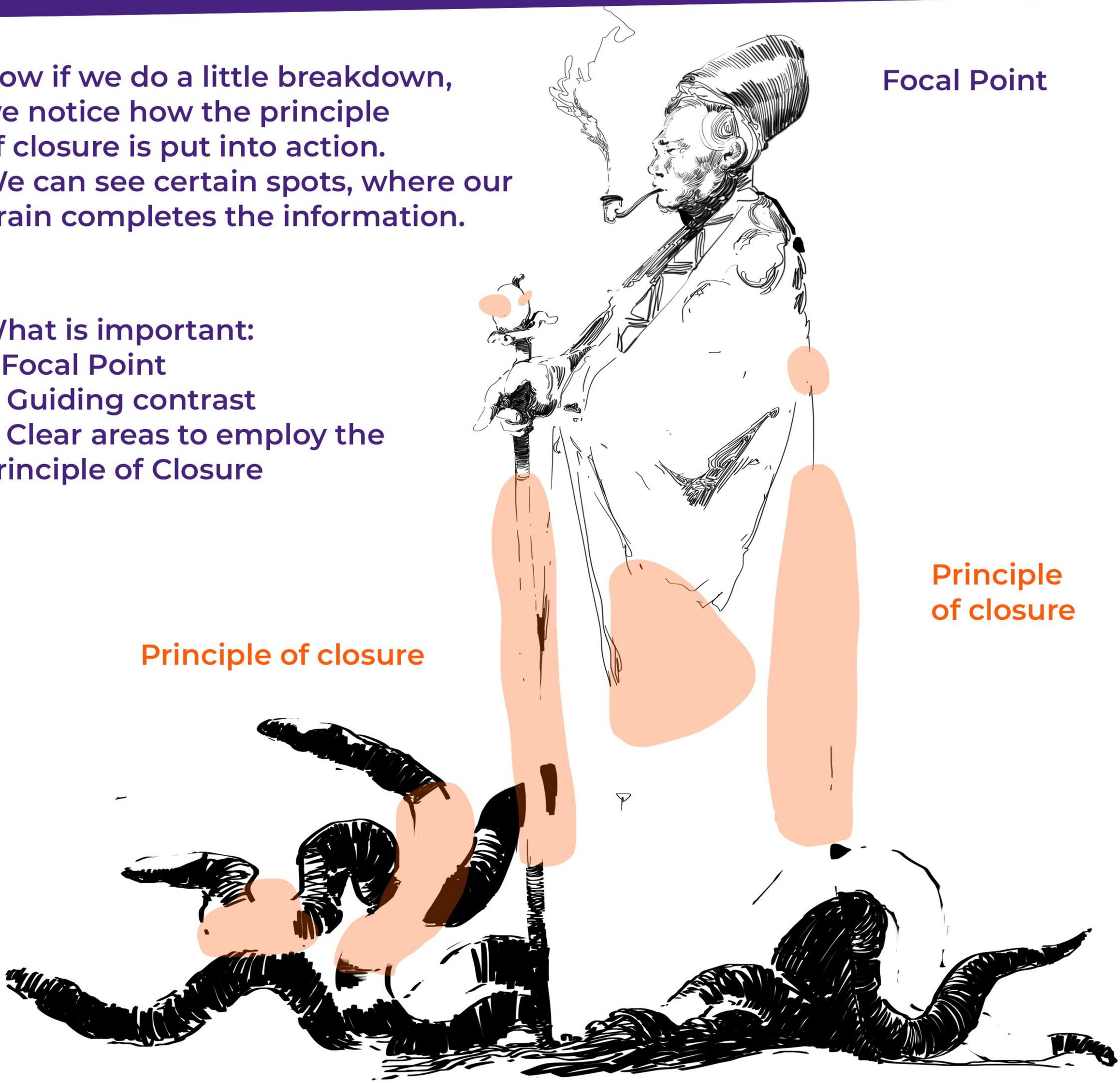
Can you see the square?

Can you see a star?

We notice what shapes are within

Now if we do a little breakdown, we notice how the principle of closure is put into action. We can see certain spots, where our brain completes the information.

What is important:
1. Focal Point
2. Guiding contrast
3. Clear areas to employ the Principle of Closure



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Gestalt Principle of Closure (4/4)

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Now you know how to apply the Gestalt Principle of Closure! Remember, you can start practicing with simpler objects, and then move to add more complexity.

Learn more about Closure and how to apply it in [this video]

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Closure (1/3)

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Closure

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Closure (2/3)

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Closure is a **Gestalt Theory** principle, and refers to the mind's ability to perceive incomplete or broken shapes as whole forms.

It is a powerful tool which allows us to **indicate elements without explicitly showing everything**.

With minimal visual information, a lot can be shown.

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Closure (3/3)

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Visible and **invisible** edges need to create a **continuous form** or shape to create a successful illusion.

At least **two values** are necessary to create closure illusions.

If it works in this simplified form, it will work with more complex value arrangements as well.

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Exploring Character Design

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Exploring Character Design (2/4)

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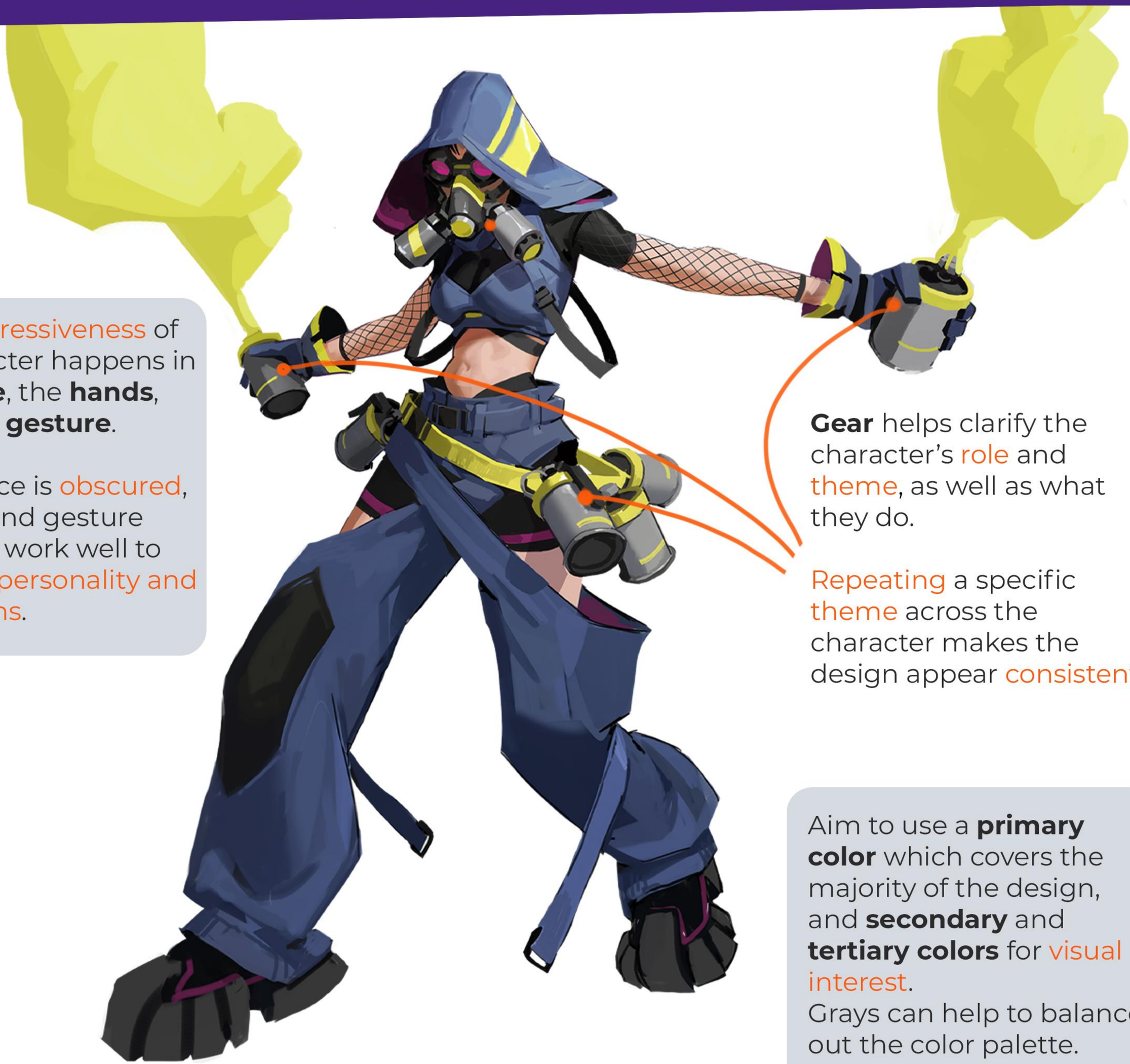

The expressiveness of a character happens in the **face**, the **hands**, and the **gesture**.

If the face is obscured, hands and gesture need to work well to convey personality and emotions.

Gear helps clarify the character's role and theme, as well as what they do.

Repeating a specific theme across the character makes the design appear consistent.

Aim to use a **primary color** which covers the majority of the design, and **secondary** and **tertiary colors** for visual interest.
Grays can help to balance out the color palette.

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Exploring Character Design (3/4)

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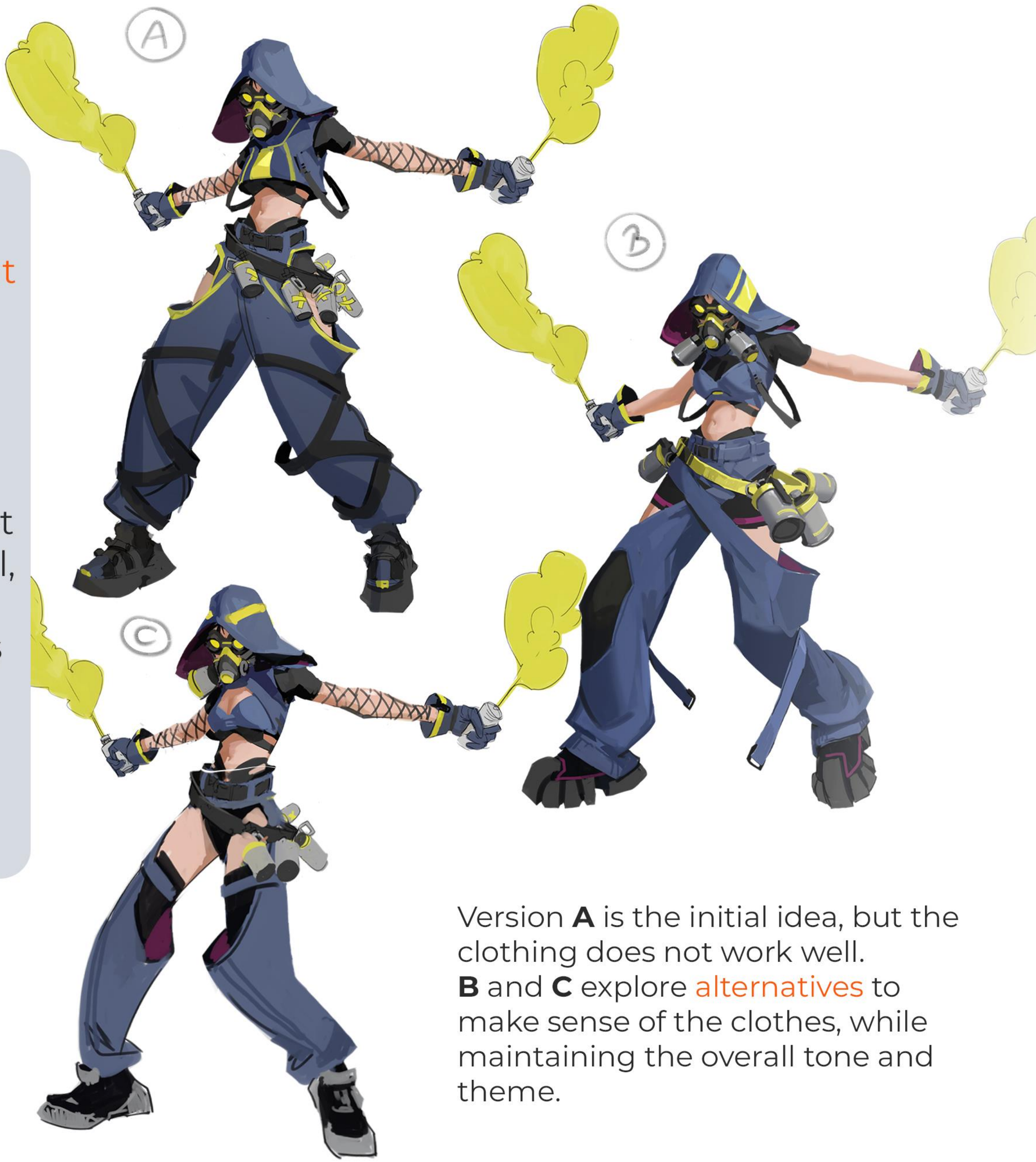
Iteration sketches help explore different designs, as well as different combinations of clothing and gear.

Even though the first idea might work well, developing **alternative versions** can help find stronger or more suitable designs.



Version **A** is the initial idea, but the clothing does not work well.
B and **C** explore alternatives to make sense of the clothes, while maintaining the overall tone and theme.

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Exploring Character Design (4/4)

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Call-outs of important **gear** or specific **details** bring additional information about the character. This can help 3D artists and anyone else who needs to work with the concept to better understand the idea and design.

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Shape Readability

Tips on shape

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Shape Readability (2/4)

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When designing a character early on, readability through major and medium shapes should be prioritized. Checking the silhouette and zooming out to analyze are important steps.

In the next slide we will analyze why.

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Shape Readability (3/4)

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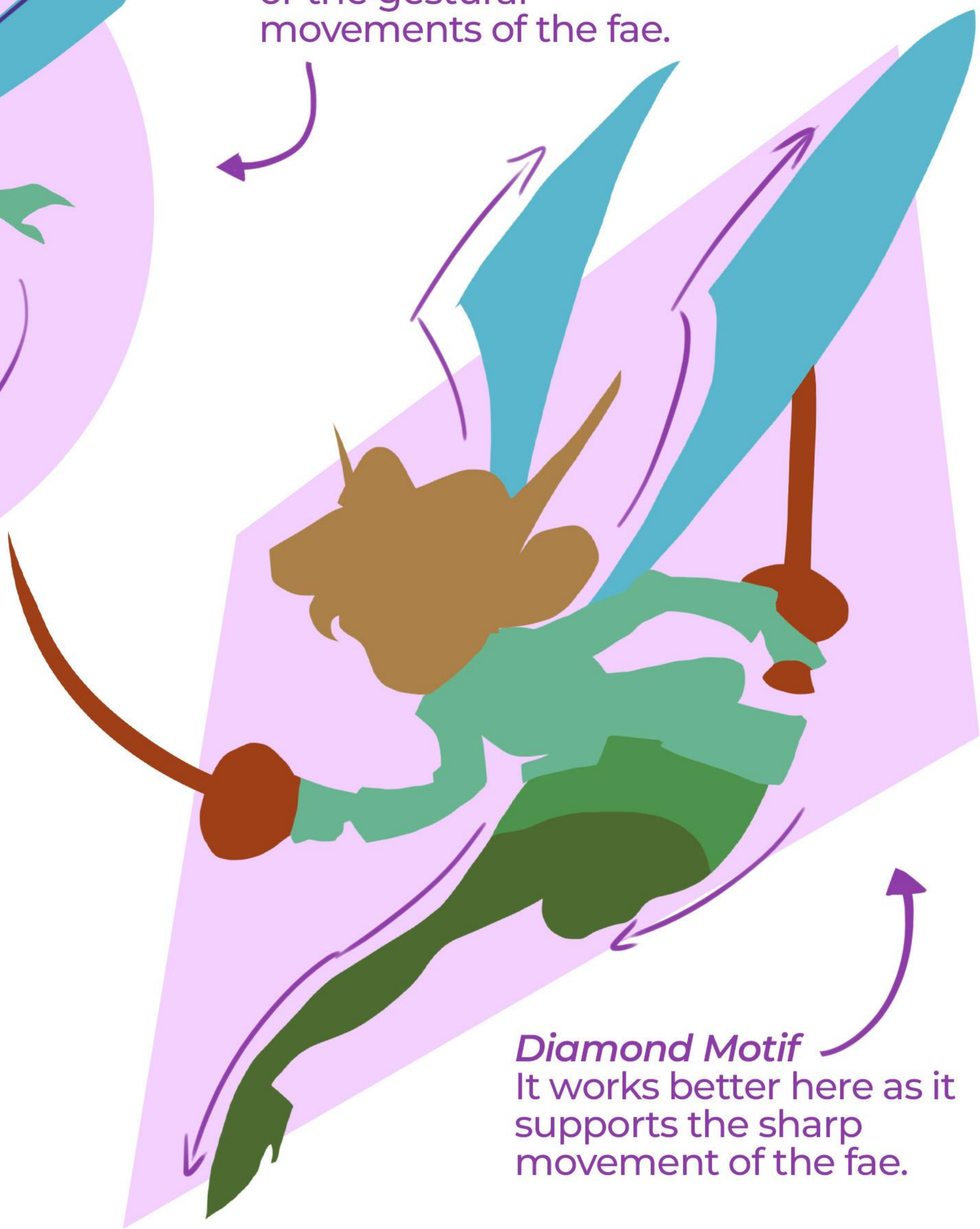
Conflicting and unappealing shape overlap.

Circular Motif
It works okay, but it doesn't support the sharp medium shapes or the gestural movements of the fae.



Certain motifs and shapes are not inherently better than others, it's how you combine them that matters.

Analyze how the limbs are clearly separated and don't conflict with the movement of the piece.

Diamond Motif
It works better here as it supports the sharp movement of the fae.

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Shape Readability (4/4)

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Lastly, it's wise to separate materials and other elements into distinct, clear value shapes. The skin, hair, clothing, and wings each have different value shapes, making her stand out.

Learn more about shape design & consistency in this video

Colors Used

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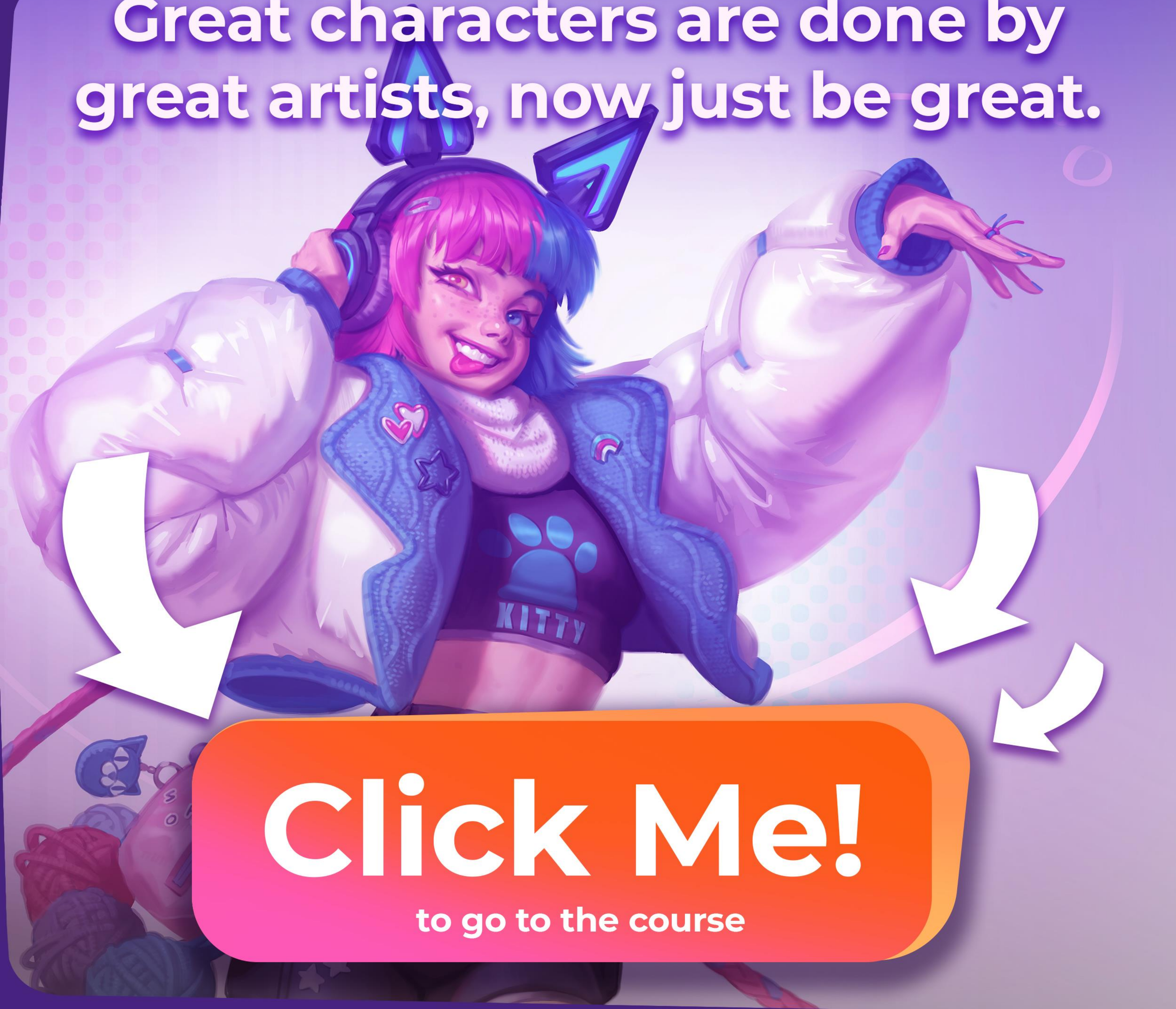
Great characters are done by great artists, now just be great.



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Convergent Design

Visign Cheat Sheets : Design

Convergent Design (2/4)

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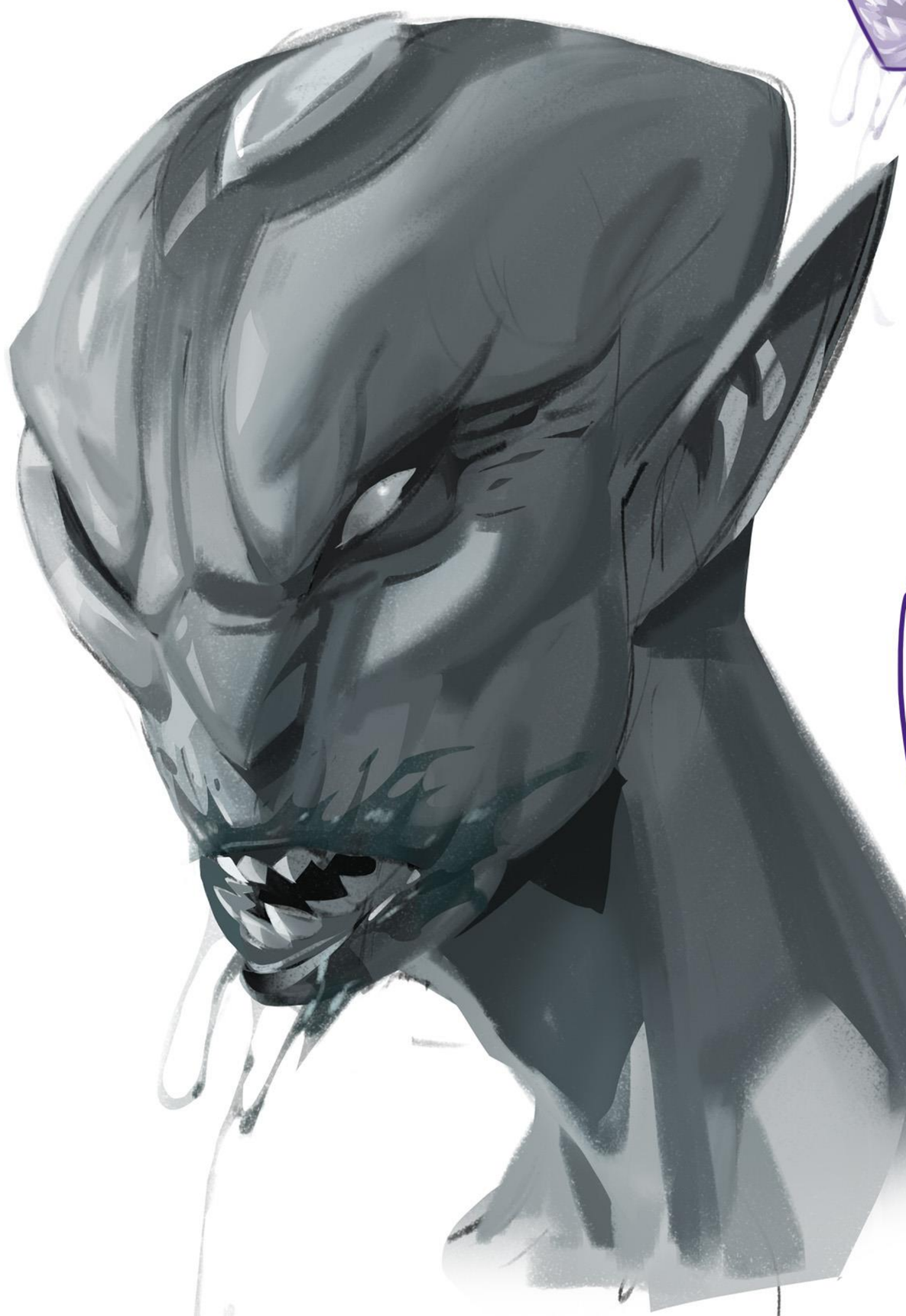
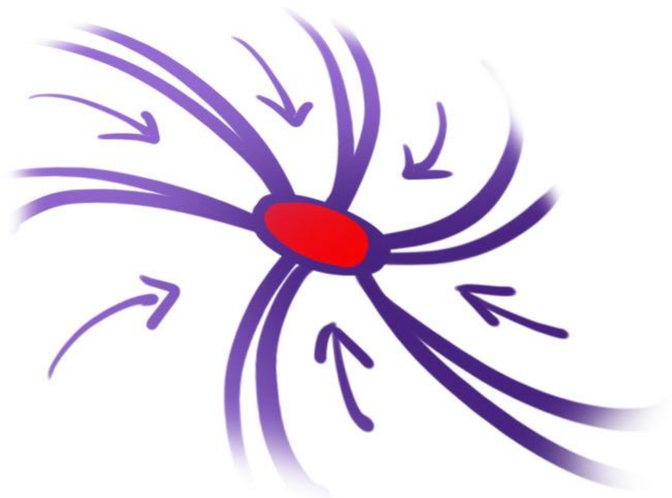
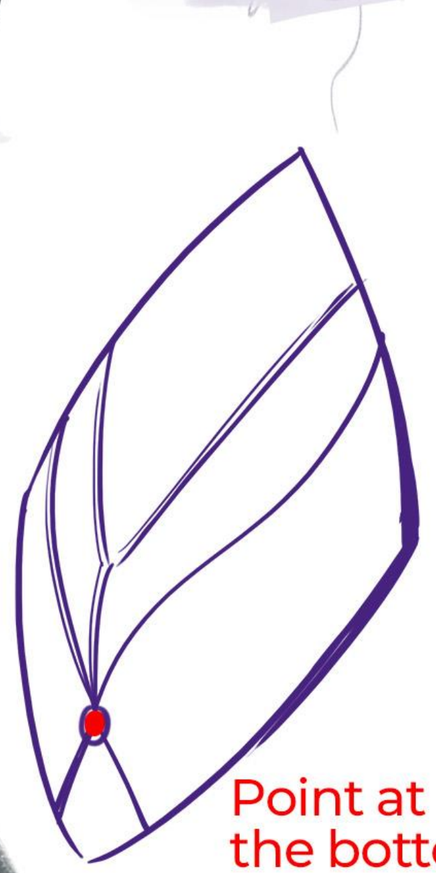
A point of convergence is where all lines meet, creating a sense of unity and flow.

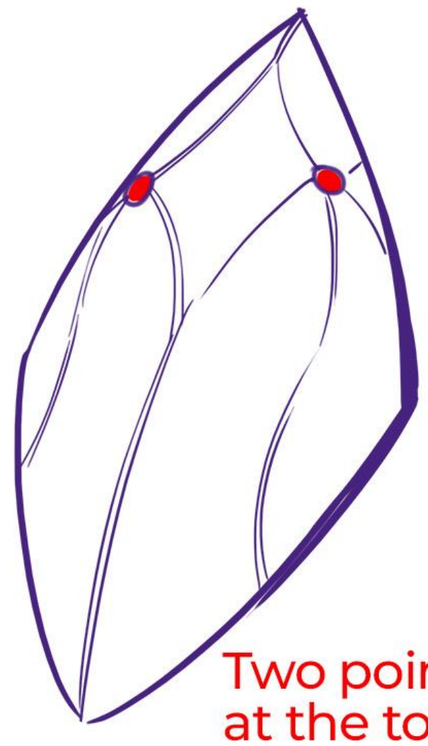
We can place ***points of convergence*** on the body or an object and have design elements follow them



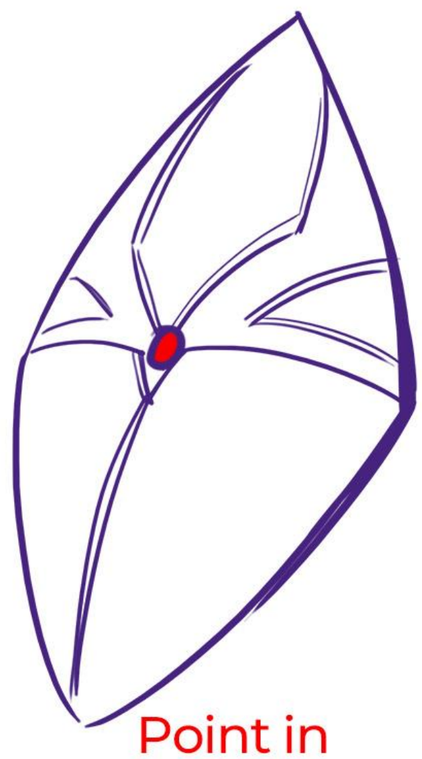




Point at the bottom



Two points at the top



Point in the middle

In this diamond-shaped example, we can place one or more points in different areas and create lines that converge toward them.

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Convergent Design (3/4)

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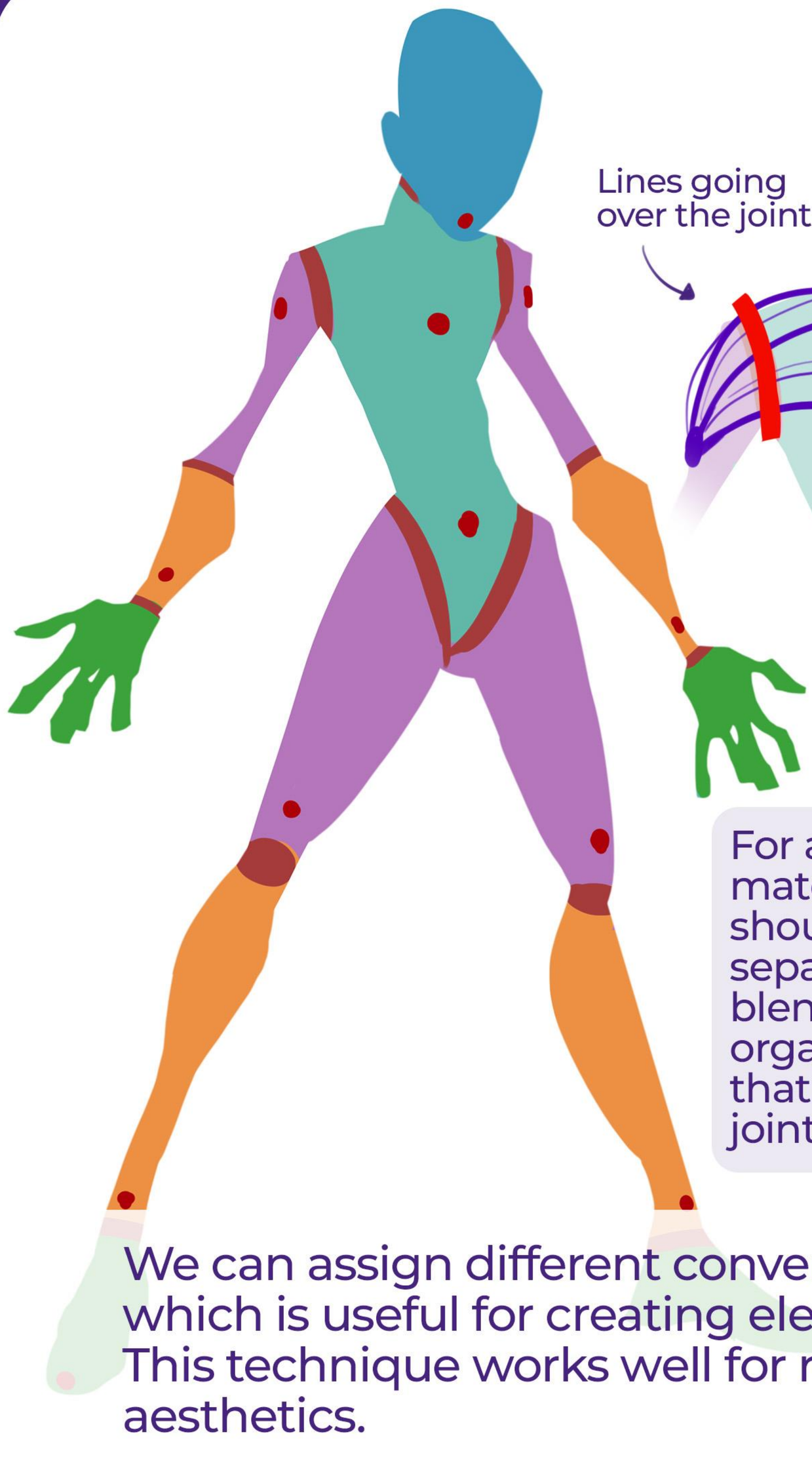
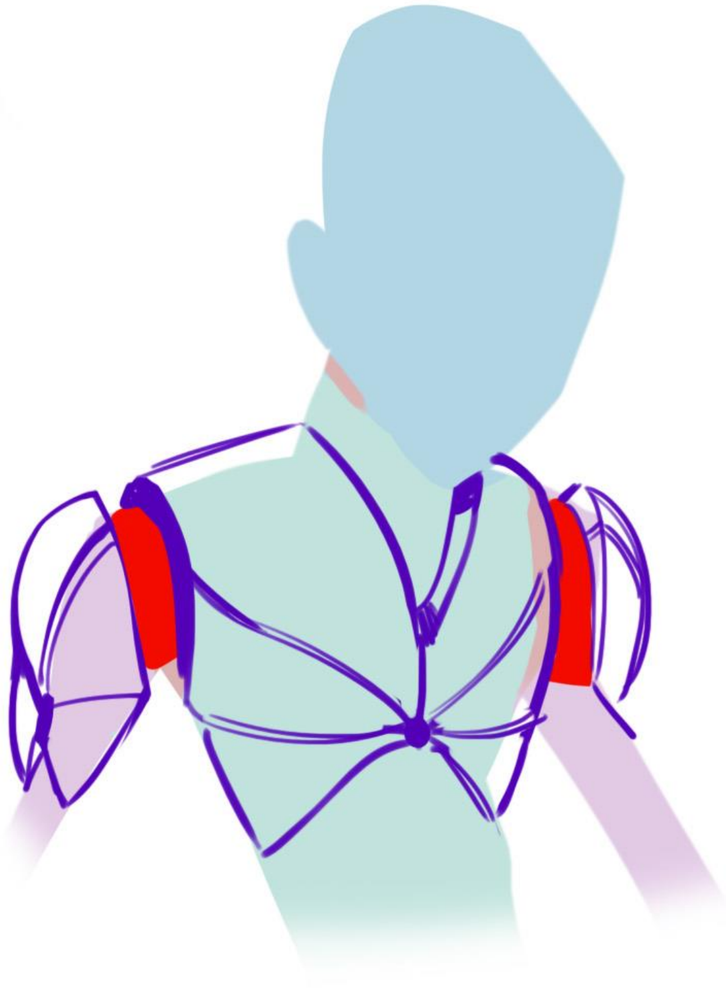


Generally, it's recommended to avoid having lines converge over a joint, unless the design is meant to be organic in some way, such as with muscle or nanopolymer for sci-fi designs.



For armor and rigid materials, joints should remain separate and not blend, unlike organic materials that can bend over joints.

We can assign different convergence points across the body, which is useful for creating elegant and dynamic designs. This technique works well for royal, regal, dynamic, or sci-fi aesthetics.

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Convergent Design (4/4)

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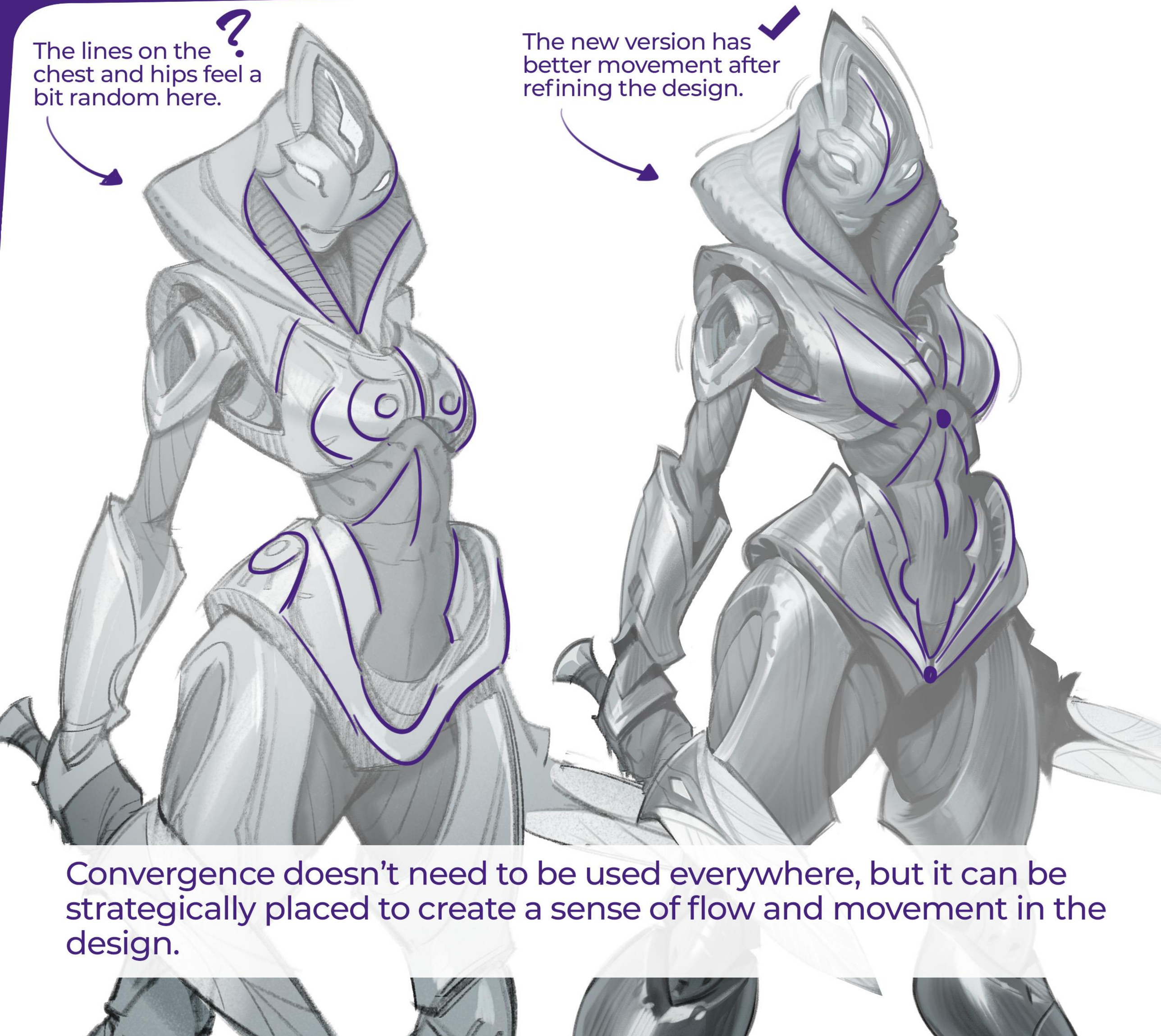

Convergence doesn’t need to be used everywhere, but it can be strategically placed to create a sense of flow and movement in the design.

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Connecting Characters

Visign Cheat Sheets : Design

Connecting Characters (2/4)

Individual character designs, as well as groups of characters often follow a clear theme.

Who they are and what we associate with them can be clearly communicated through shape language, clothing, and gear.

Combining two unrelated topics can be a great way to put a spin to a theme.

In this example: Streetwear meets Chemical Corps.

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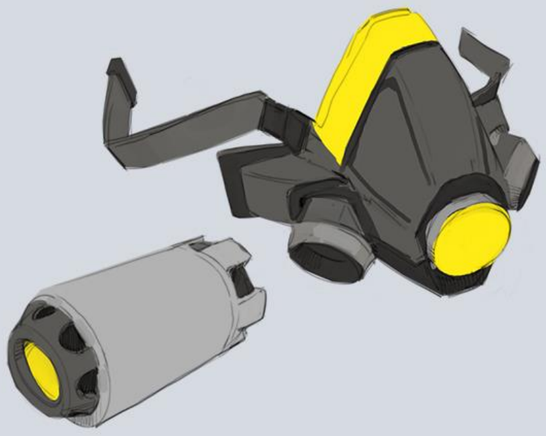
Connecting Characters (3/4)

Use theme, colors, shape language, and gear to group different characters into one faction.
Their roles in the group might be completely different, but a common shape language, color palette, and gear tie them together.



The color and design of gear and equipment can also communicate to whom they belong.

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Connecting Characters (4/4)

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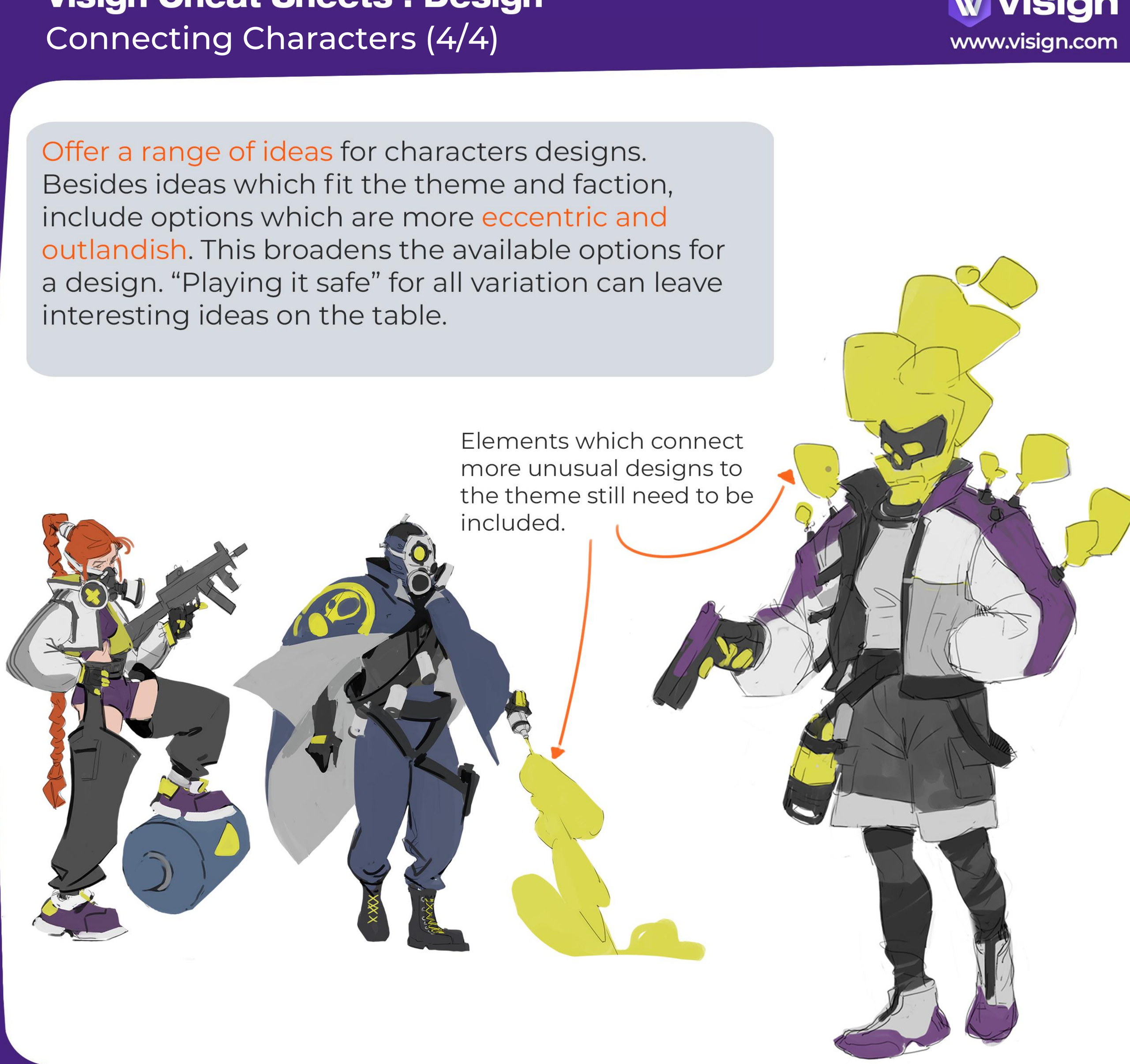
Offer a range of ideas for characters designs. Besides ideas which fit the theme and faction, include options which are more eccentric and outlandish. This broadens the available options for a design. “Playing it safe” for all variation can leave interesting ideas on the table.

Elements which connect more unusual designs to the theme still need to be included.



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Coherent Designs (1/4)

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Coherent Designs

A clear theme helps us make clear design decisions.

A simple idea can be conveyed through many different elements, which helps create layers of depth and meaning.

In this case, the theme “squid” is present as patterns, abstract shapes, as well as literal tentacles in the design.

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Coherent Designs (3/4)

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Shared materials creates a clear connection between different designs.

In the context of world-building, we can communicate what materials a group or culture has access to.

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Coherent Designs (4/4)

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Similar shapes and patterns reinforce the cohesiveness across a set of designs.

Pushing Head Shapes

Visign Cheat Sheets : Design

Pushing Head Shapes (2/4)

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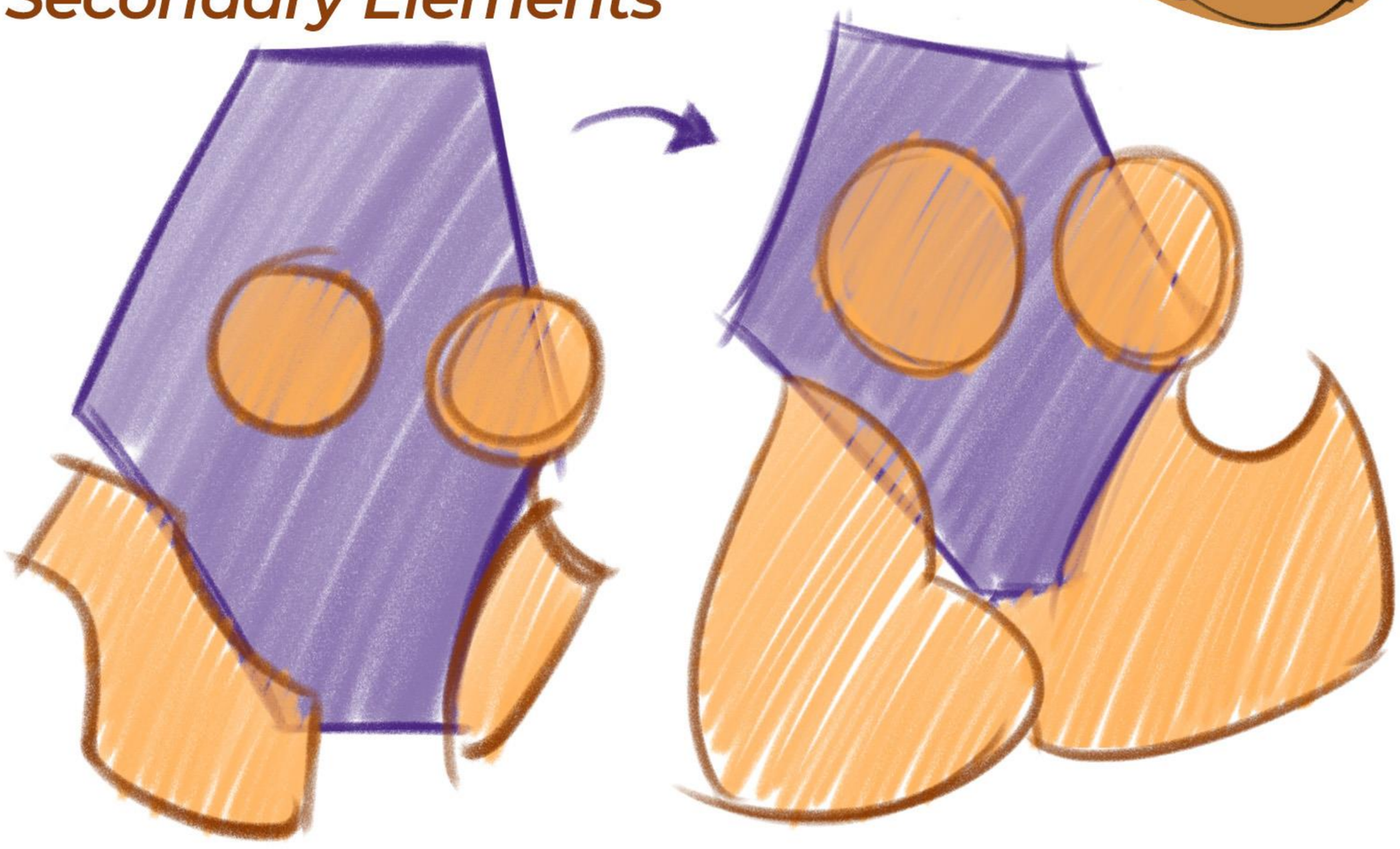
- *Primary Element*
- *Secondary Elements*



We can identify the main shapes that make up a person's head and exaggerate them, making certain areas larger or smaller to create interesting contrast.

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Pushing Head Shapes (3/4)

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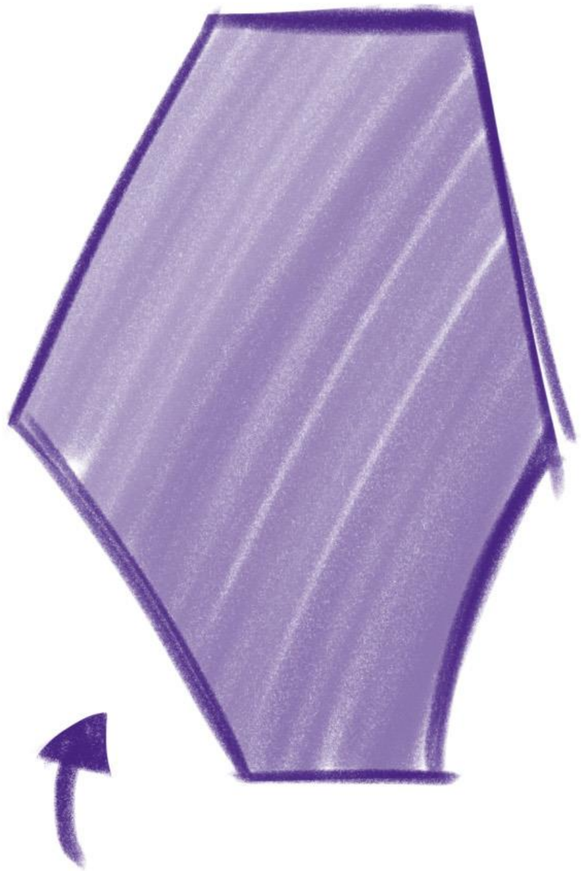
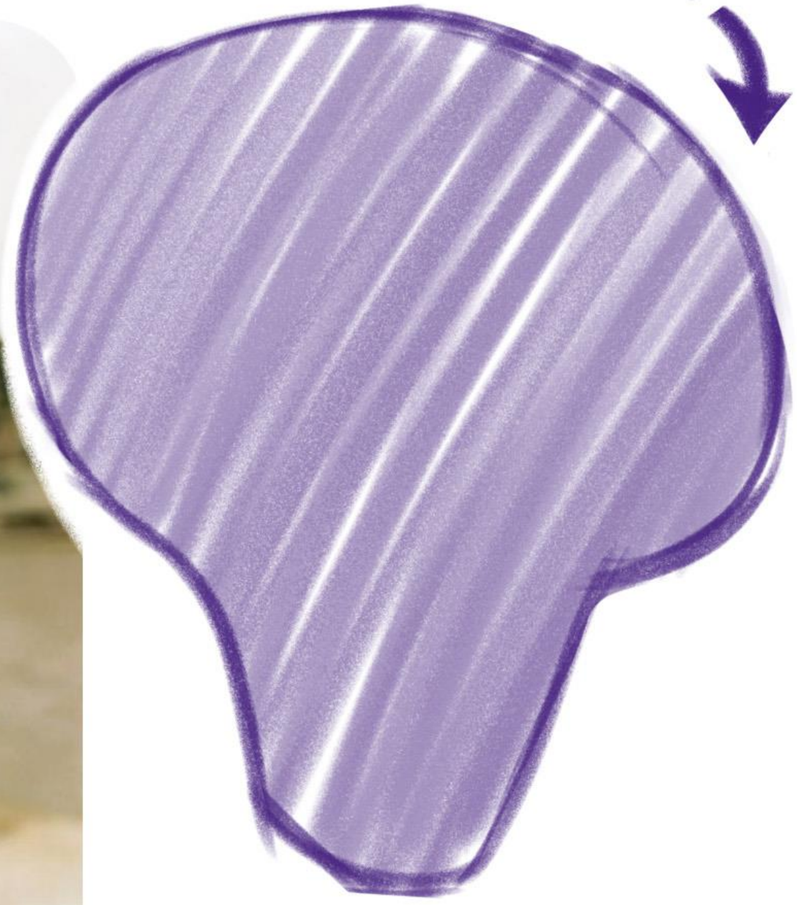
Diamond Shape



Egg Shape



Bulb Shape

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Pushing Head Shapes (4/4)

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Find the main shape and use it to emphasize key features in our portraits, capturing the personality of the person.

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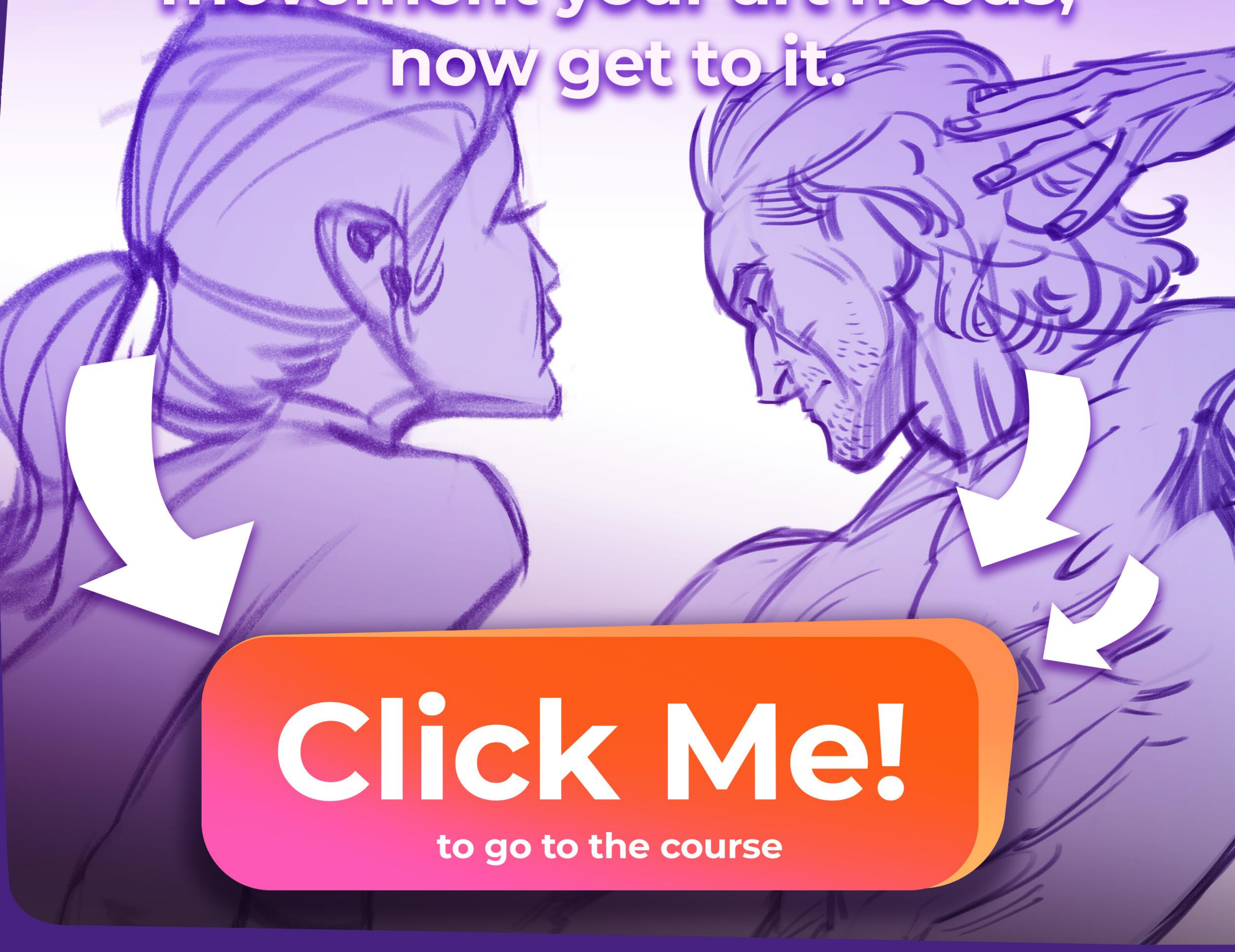
Gesture creates the movement your art needs, now get to it.



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Stylized Eyes

Tips on shape

Visign Cheat Sheets : Design

Stylized Eyes (2/4)

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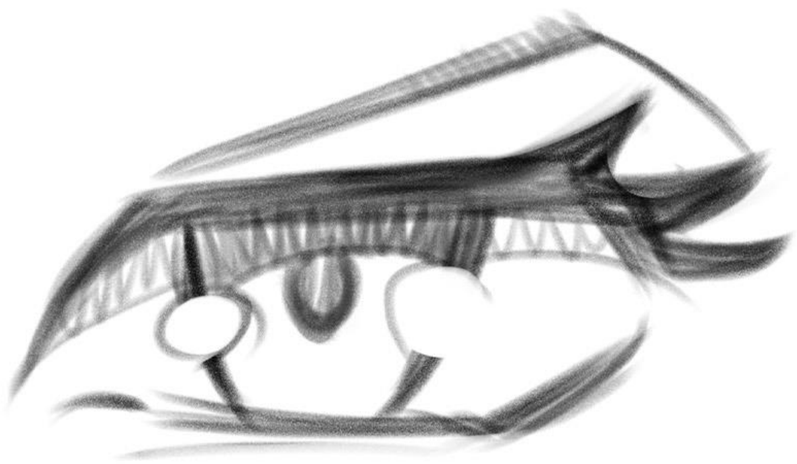
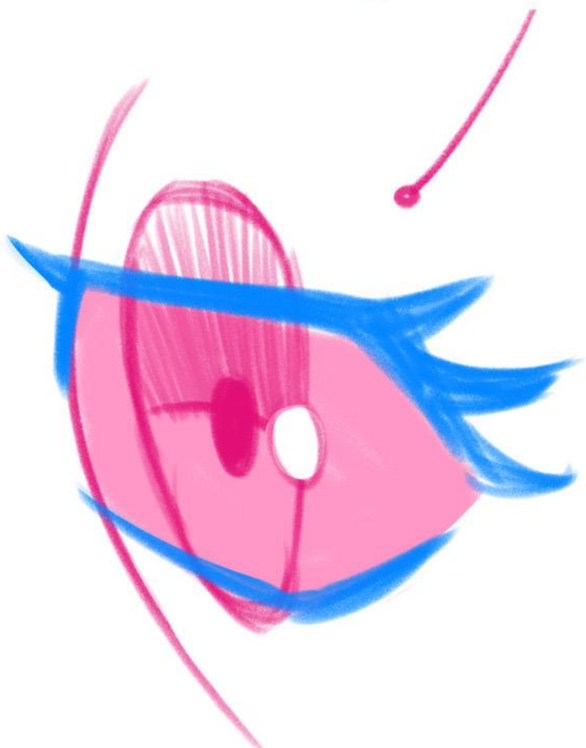
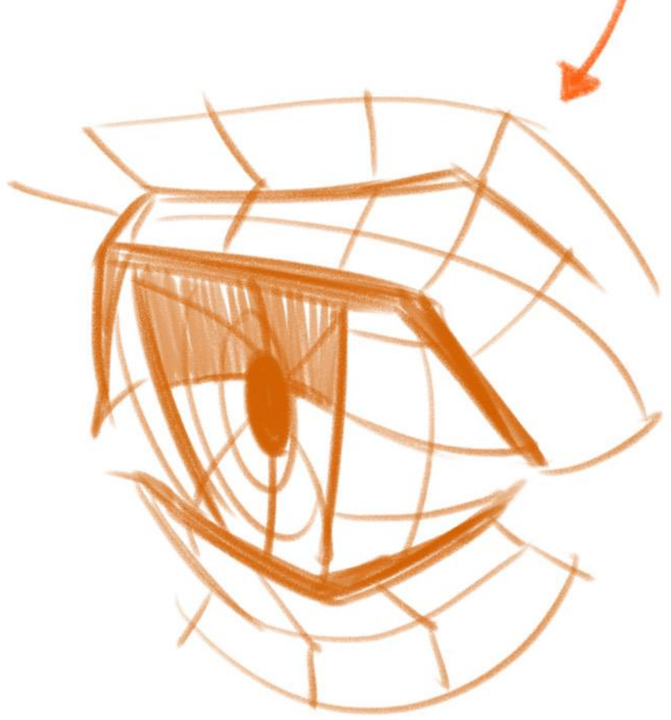
Realisitc

Stylized

We can modify and simplify when stylizing. Here we can see the eyeball doesn't follow real anatomical structure, but this is **intentional to exaggerate** the size and shape of the iris.







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Stylized Eyes (3/4)

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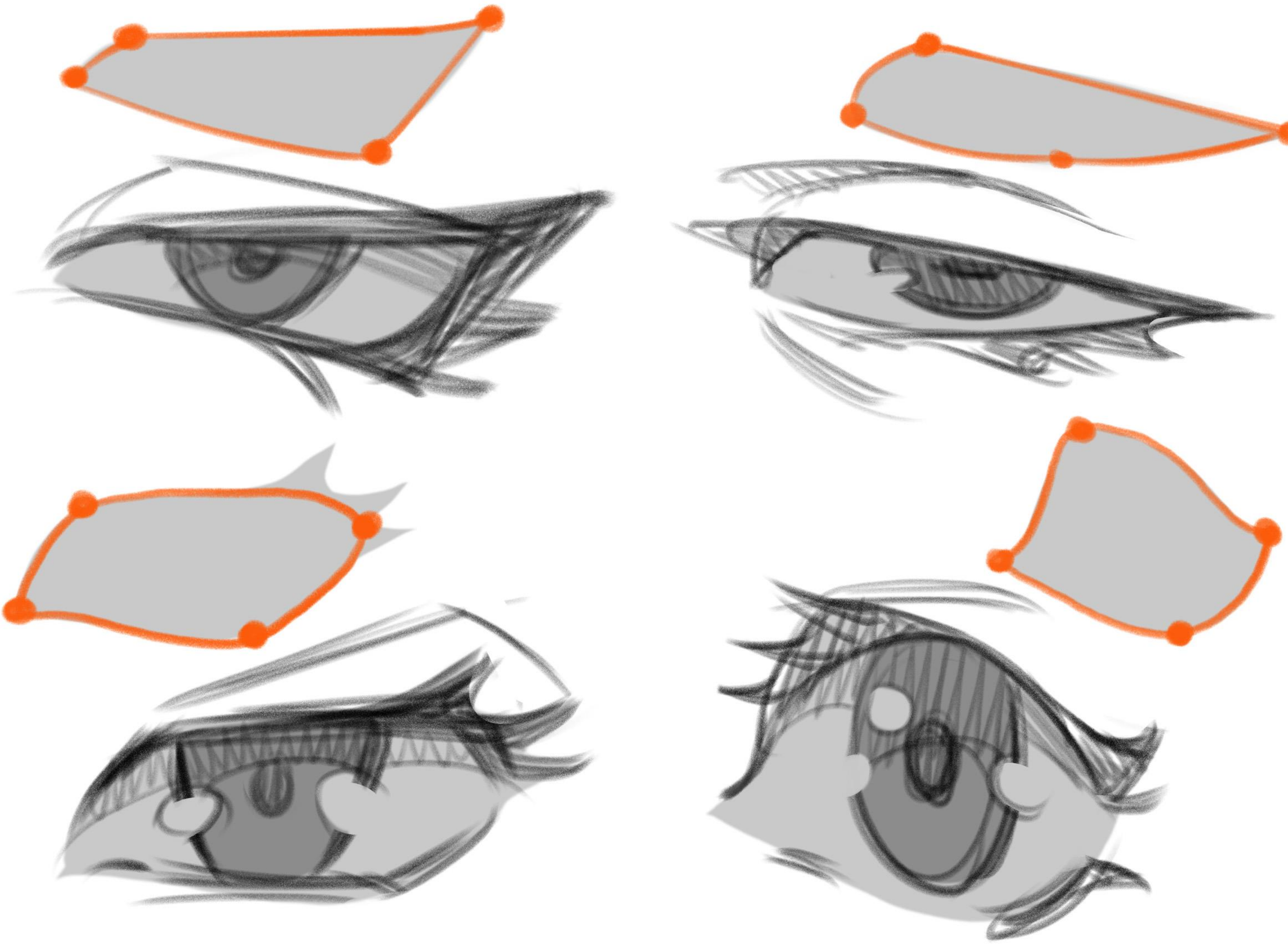

These stylized eyes are influenced by anime, with a focus on exaggerated shapes. By adjusting the corners and apexes of the upper and lower eyelids, we can play with expression and personality while still respecting the fundamentals of anatomy.

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Stylized Eyes (4/4)

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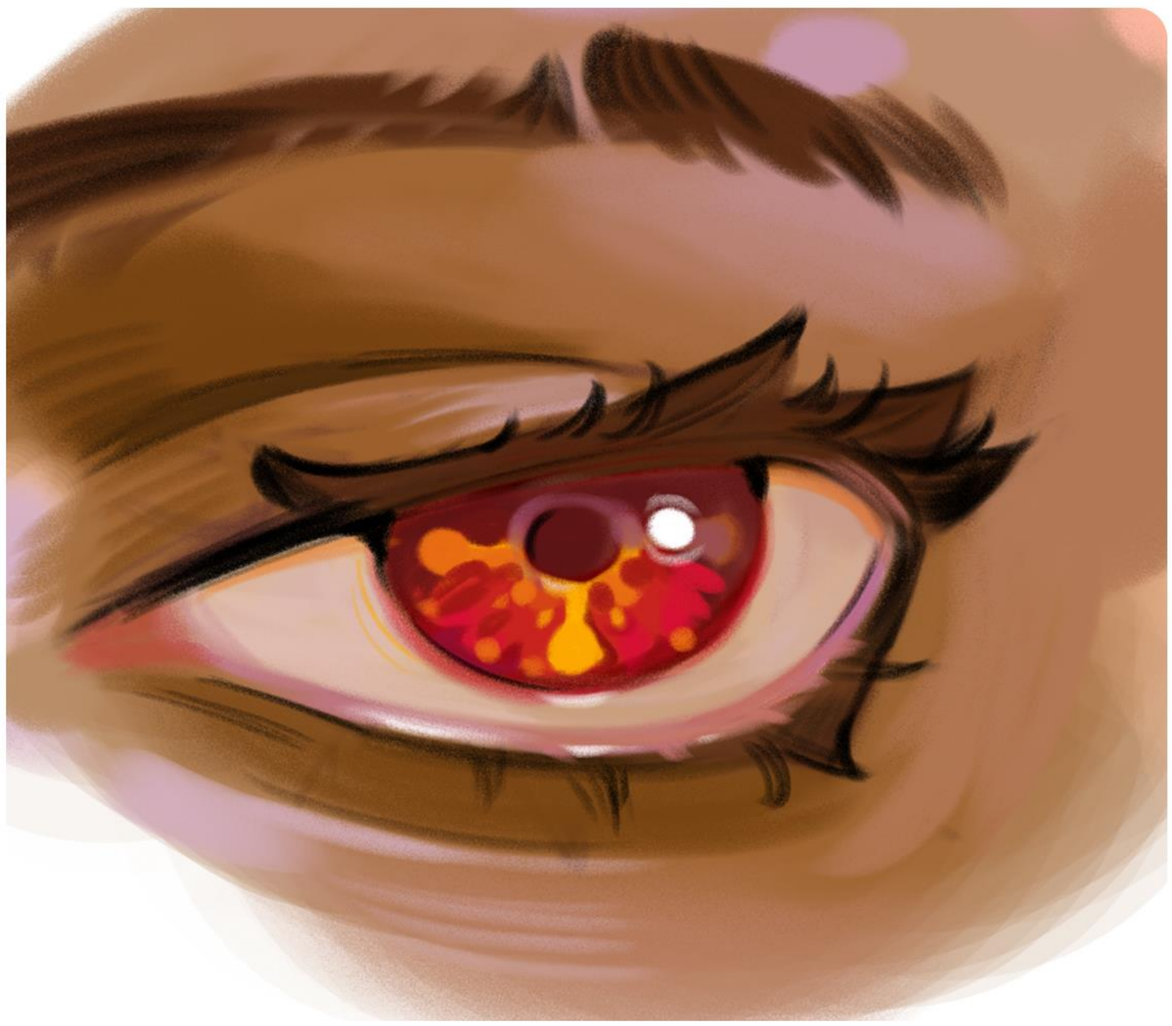
When rendering stylized eyes, we can exaggerate certain elements, but some elements should be respected – such as the white of the eye, iris, eyelids, and eyelashes.
In this example, the eyelashes are more exaggerated, the iris features an unusual color, and the tear duct has been simplified.



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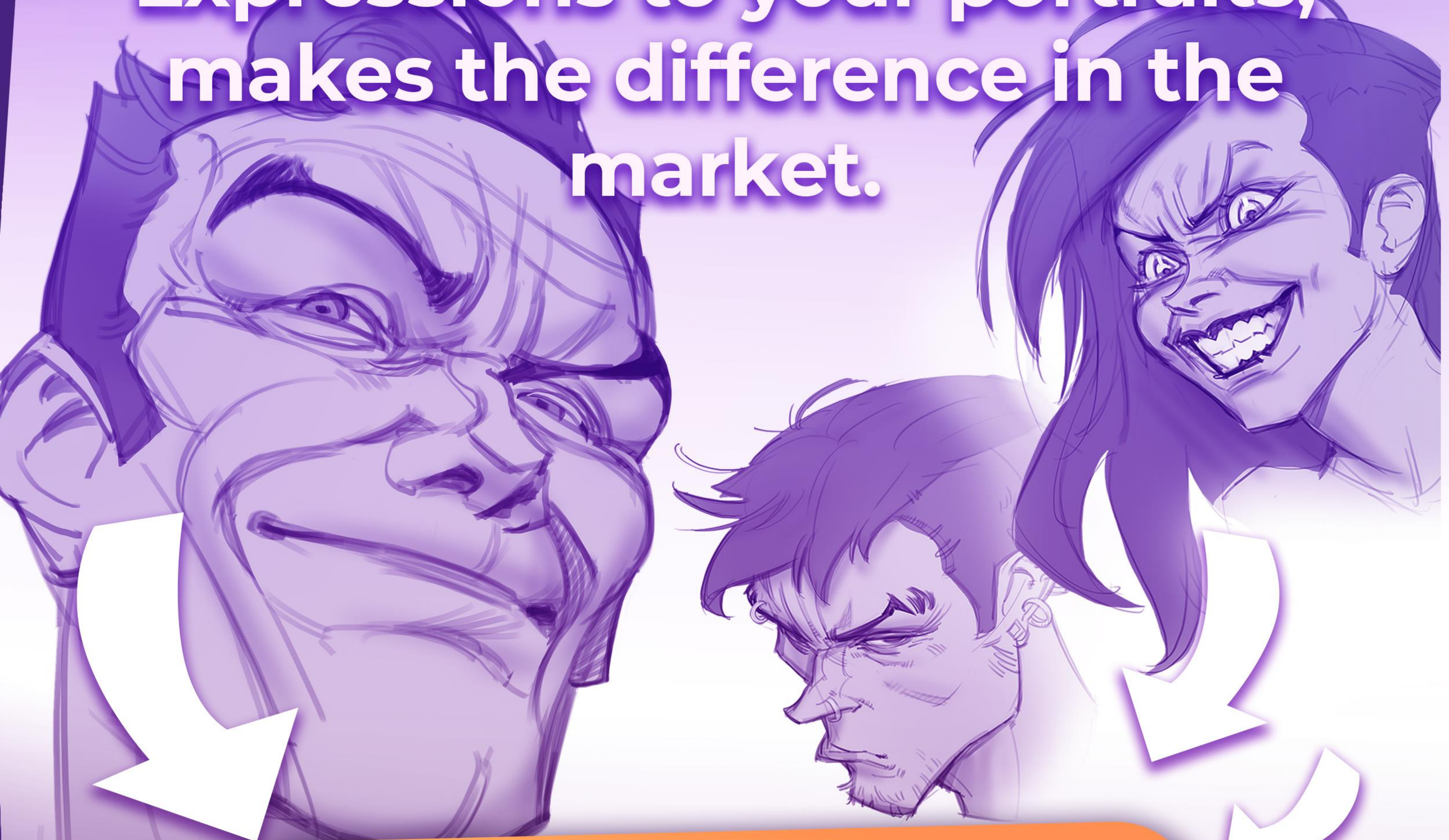
Expressions to your portraits, makes the difference in the market.



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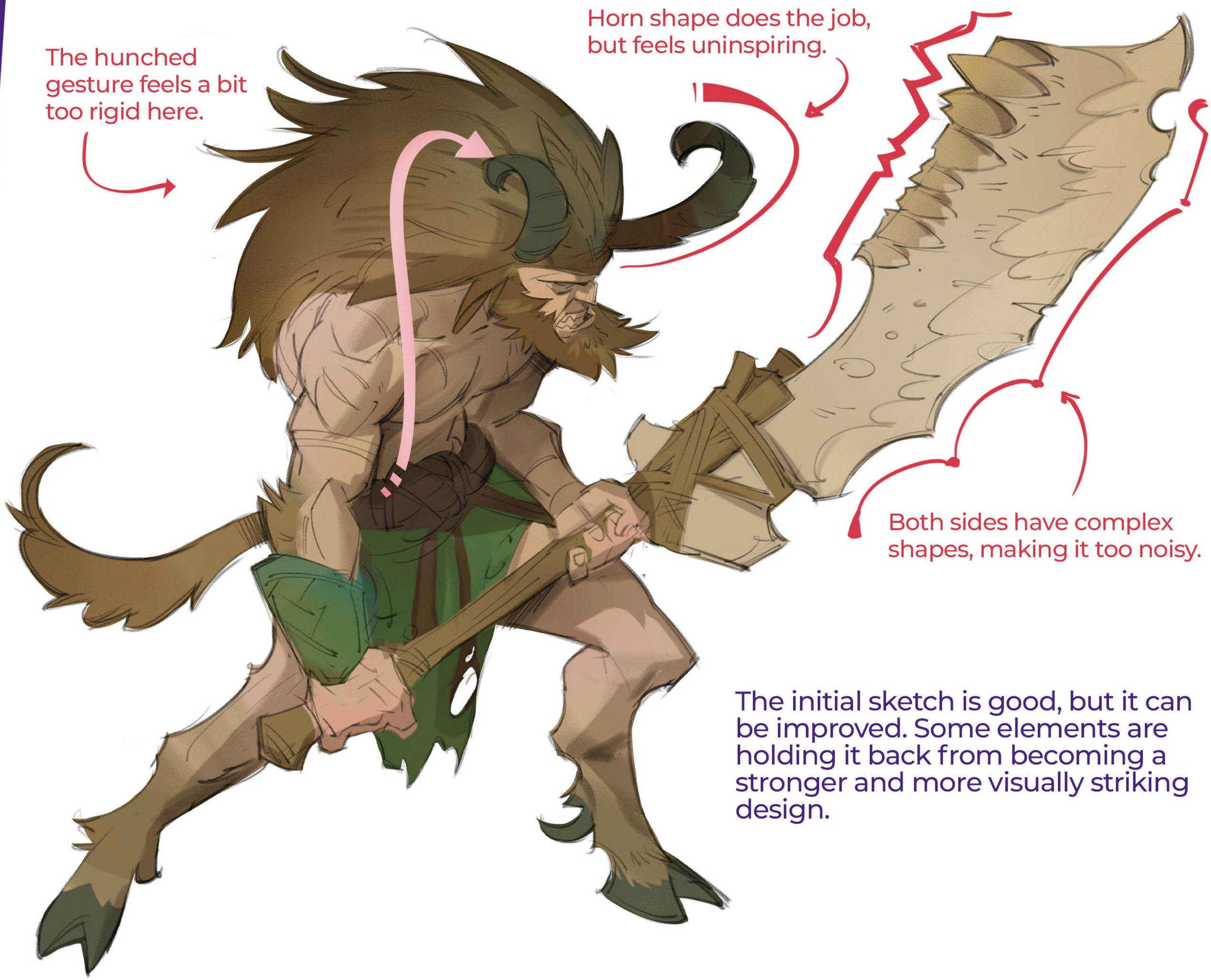
Push and Pull

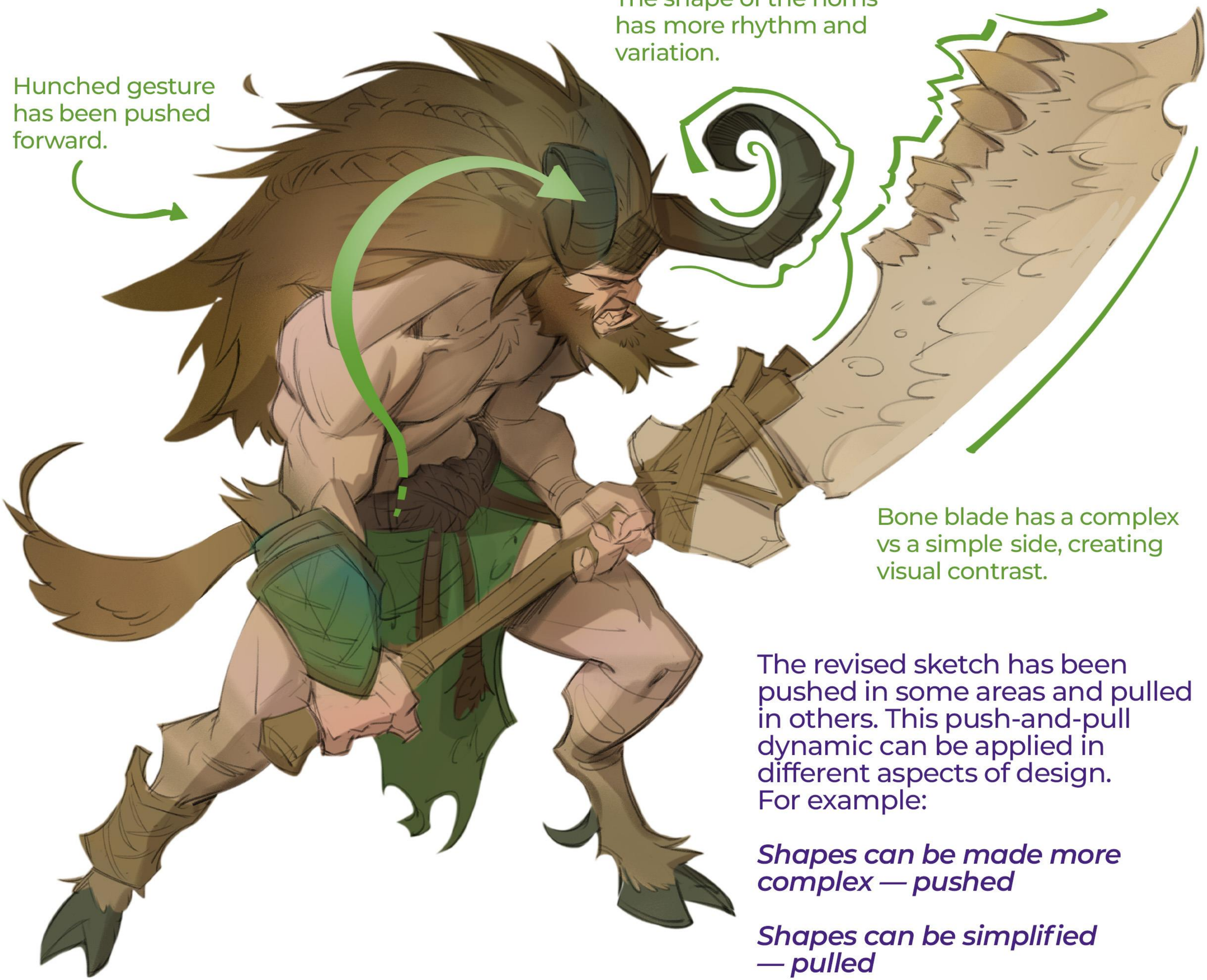
Tips on shape

Initial Sketch


The hunched gesture feels a bit too rigid here.
Horn shape does the job, but feels uninspiring.
Both sides have complex shapes, making it too noisy.

The initial sketch is good, but it can be improved. Some elements are holding it back from becoming a stronger and more visually striking design.

Revised Sketch


The shape of the horns has more rhythm and variation.
Hunched gesture has been pushed forward.
Bone blade has a complex vs a simple side, creating visual contrast.

The revised sketch has been pushed in some areas and pulled in others. This push-and-pull dynamic can be applied in different aspects of design. For example:

Shapes can be made more complex — pushed

Shapes can be simplified — pulled

Final Render

Thanks to the revised sketch, we can proceed with the final rendering, which now has a stronger foundation.

Sometimes a design can be elevated simply by pushing certain areas and pulling others.

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Sketch Interpretation (1/4)

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Sketch Interpretation

Visign Cheat Sheets : Design

Sketch Interpretation (2/4)

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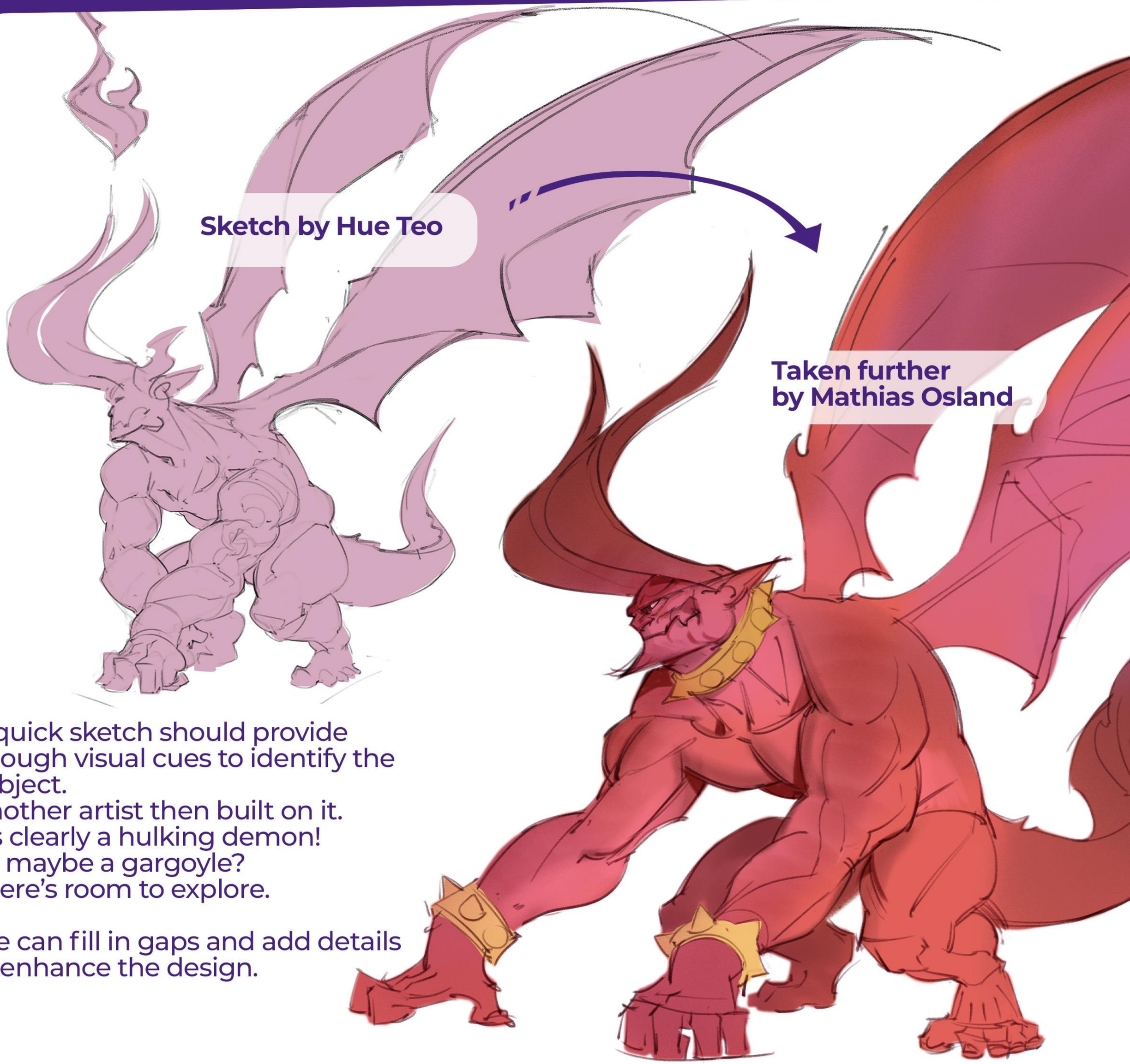

A quick sketch should provide enough visual cues to identify the subject.
Another artist then built on it.
It’s clearly a hulking demon!
Or maybe a gargoyle?
There’s room to explore.

We can fill in gaps and add details to enhance the design.

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Sketch Interpretation (3/4)

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Sketch by Hue Teo

Taken further
by Mathias Osland

We respect the original sketch's creative decisions and overall proportions, building upon them.

- *The pose was adjusted for readability.*
- *Brass spiked collars were added to reinforce the demonic visual language.*
- *Since colors were never discussed, that was left for Mathias to decide.*

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Sketch Interpretation (4/4)

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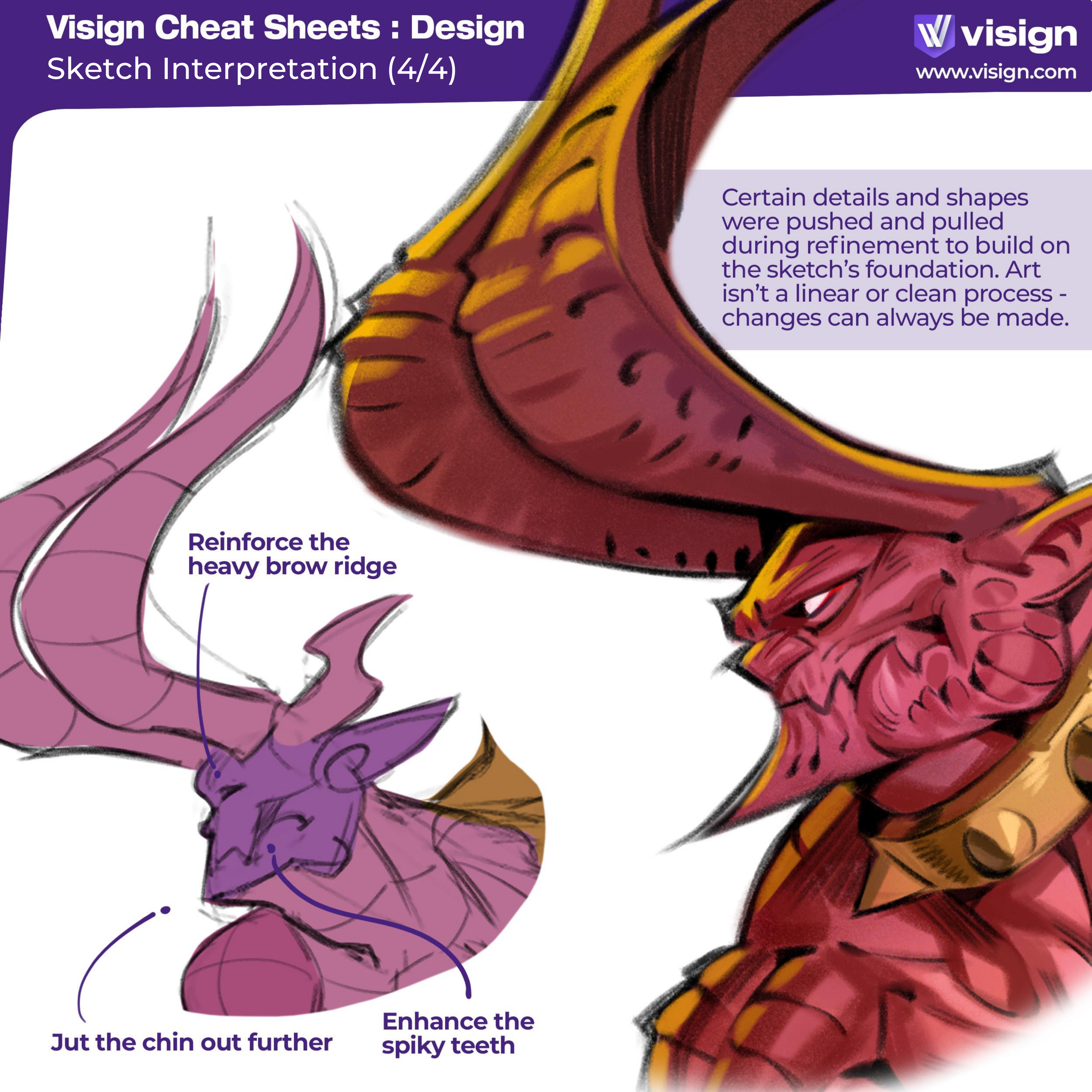
Certain details and shapes were pushed and pulled during refinement to build on the sketch's foundation. Art isn't a linear or clean process - changes can always be made.



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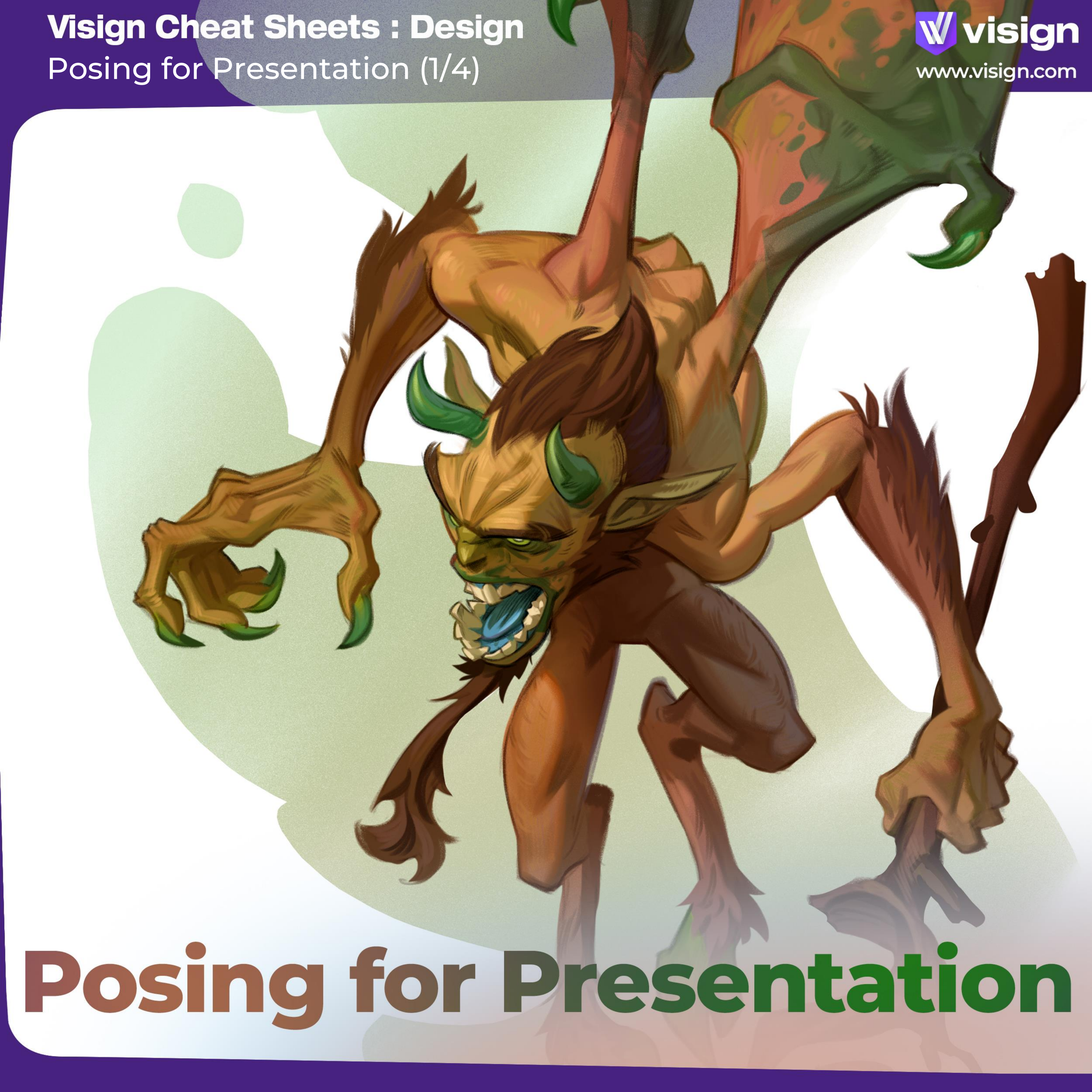

Posing for Presentation

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Posing for Presentation (2/4)

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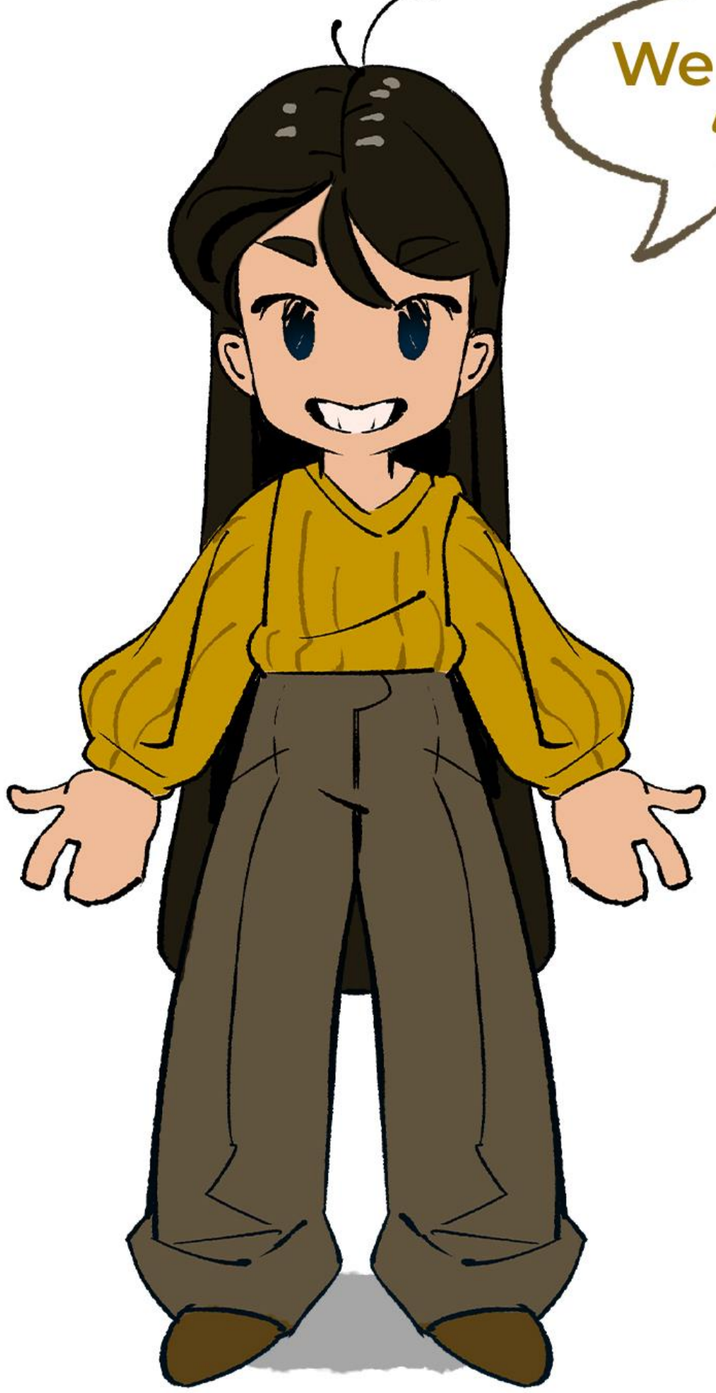
When sketching and designing characters or creatures, you don't always need to pose them right away. Starting with a static pose allows you to explore multiple sketches more easily.

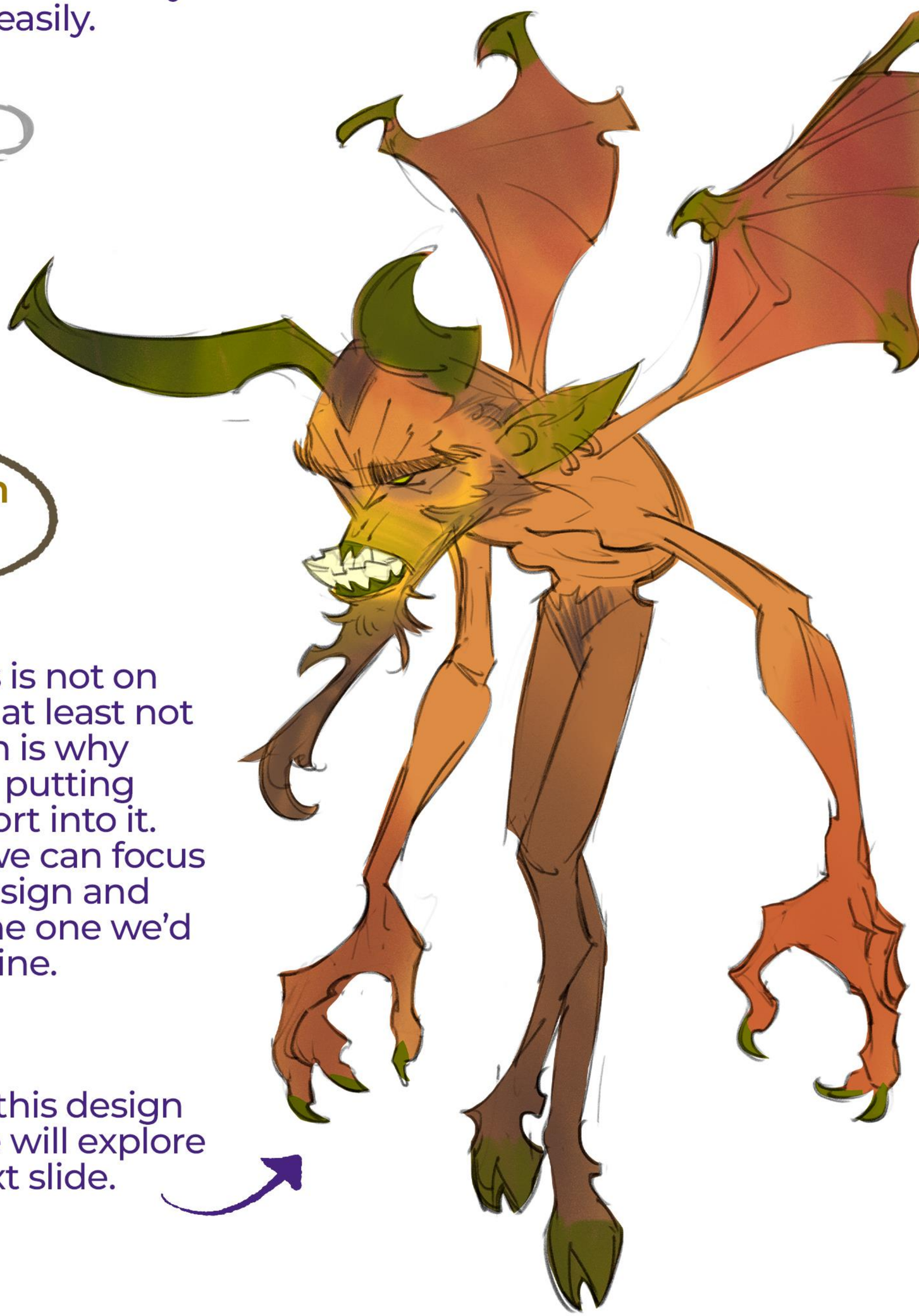


We call this an 'A' pose!

The focus is not on the pose, at least not yet, which is why we're not putting much effort into it. Instead, we can focus on the design and choose the one we'd like to refine.

We have this design which we will explore in the next slide.

Cool design, boring pose...



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Posing for Presentation (3/4)

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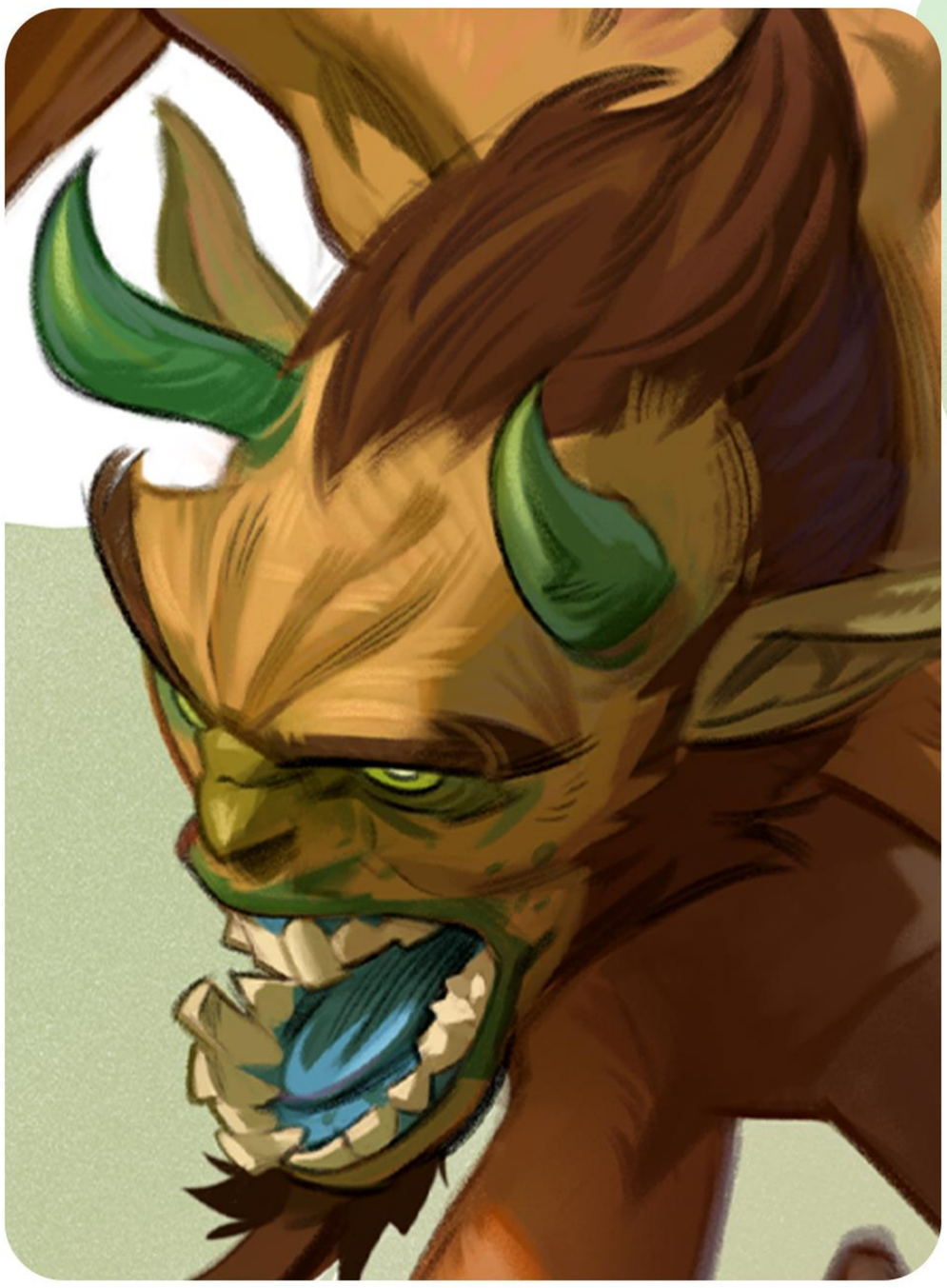
We've taken the design further, refining and tweaking it, and added a dynamic pose. This helps with presentation and adds personality to the design, making it feel more real.

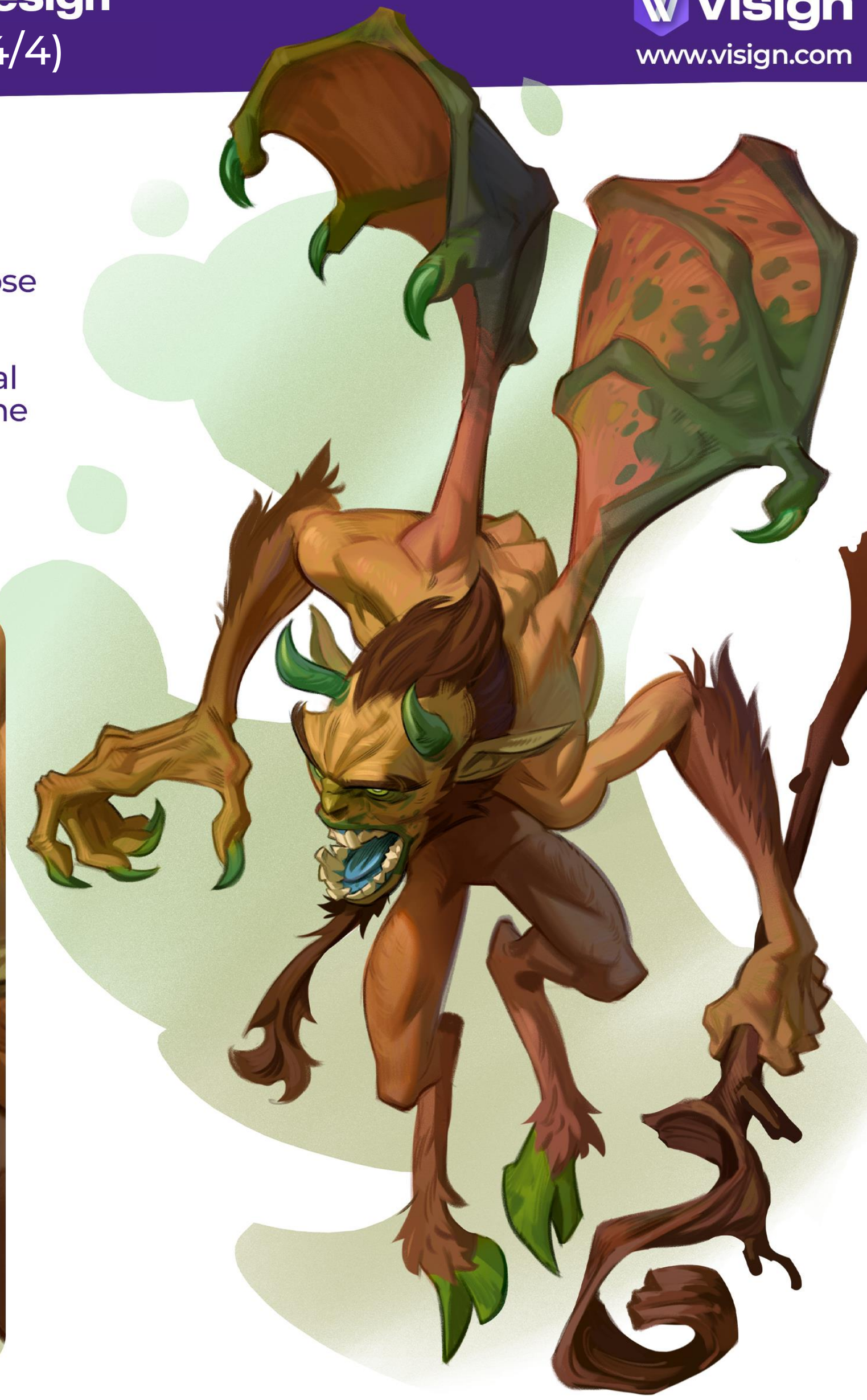
But remember, the pose doesn't always have to be dynamic or complicated, just convincing enough to make the character feel alive.

Final

Once we have the design and pose we want, rendering becomes a very enjoyable process.
We can also take pride in the final outcome because we've put in the effort to make it presentable.

Details





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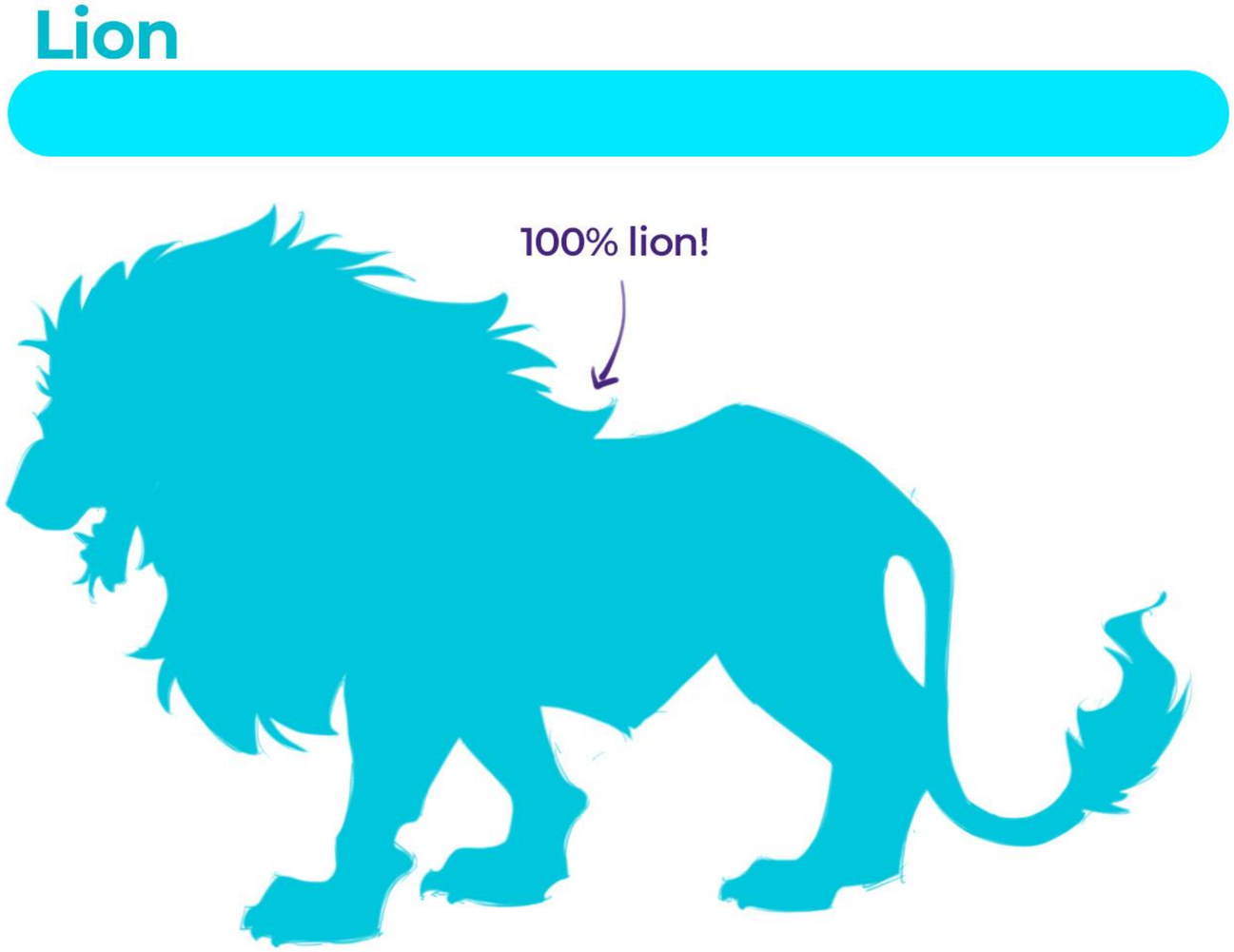
Hybridization

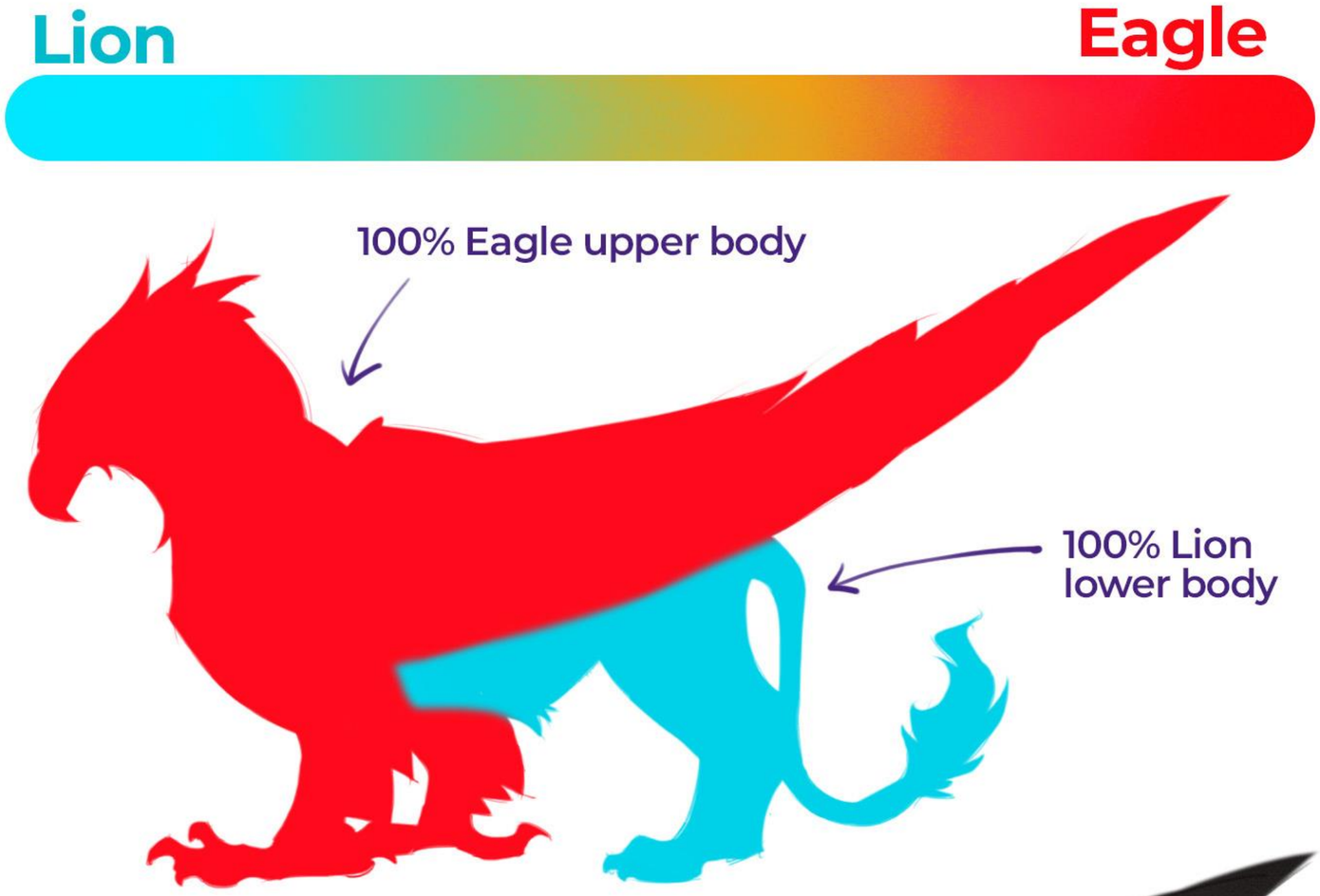
Understanding the Base Form:

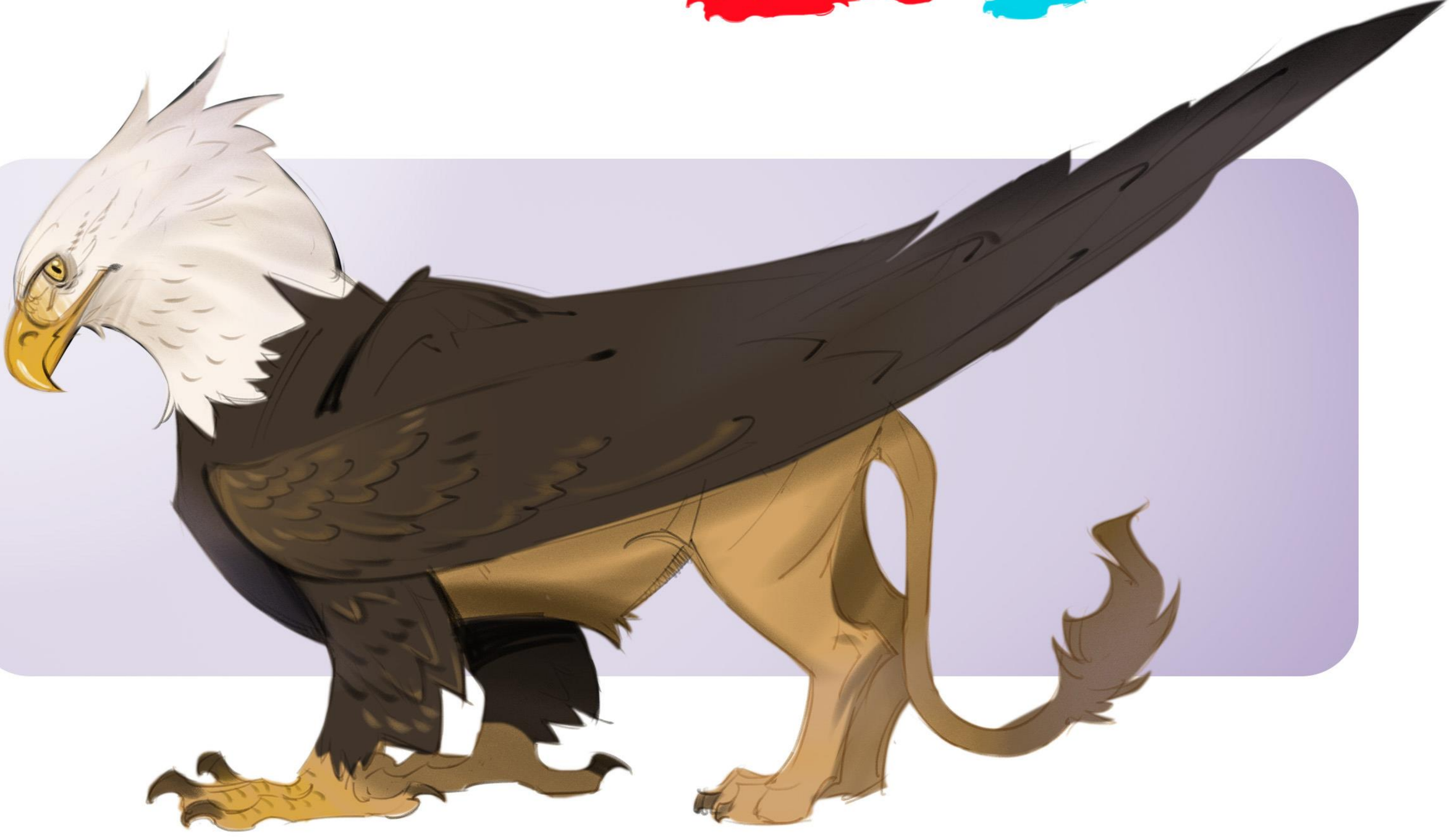
Before experimenting with hybridization, it's important to study real animals. Observing their anatomy, shapes, and movement helps create believable hybrids. A strong foundation in real-world biology makes even the most fantastical designs feel grounded and natural.



Composite hybridization:

In creature design combines traits from different sources while keeping each element distinct and recognizable, like a gryphon with clearly separate ***eagle*** and ***lion*** features.





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Hybridization (4/4)

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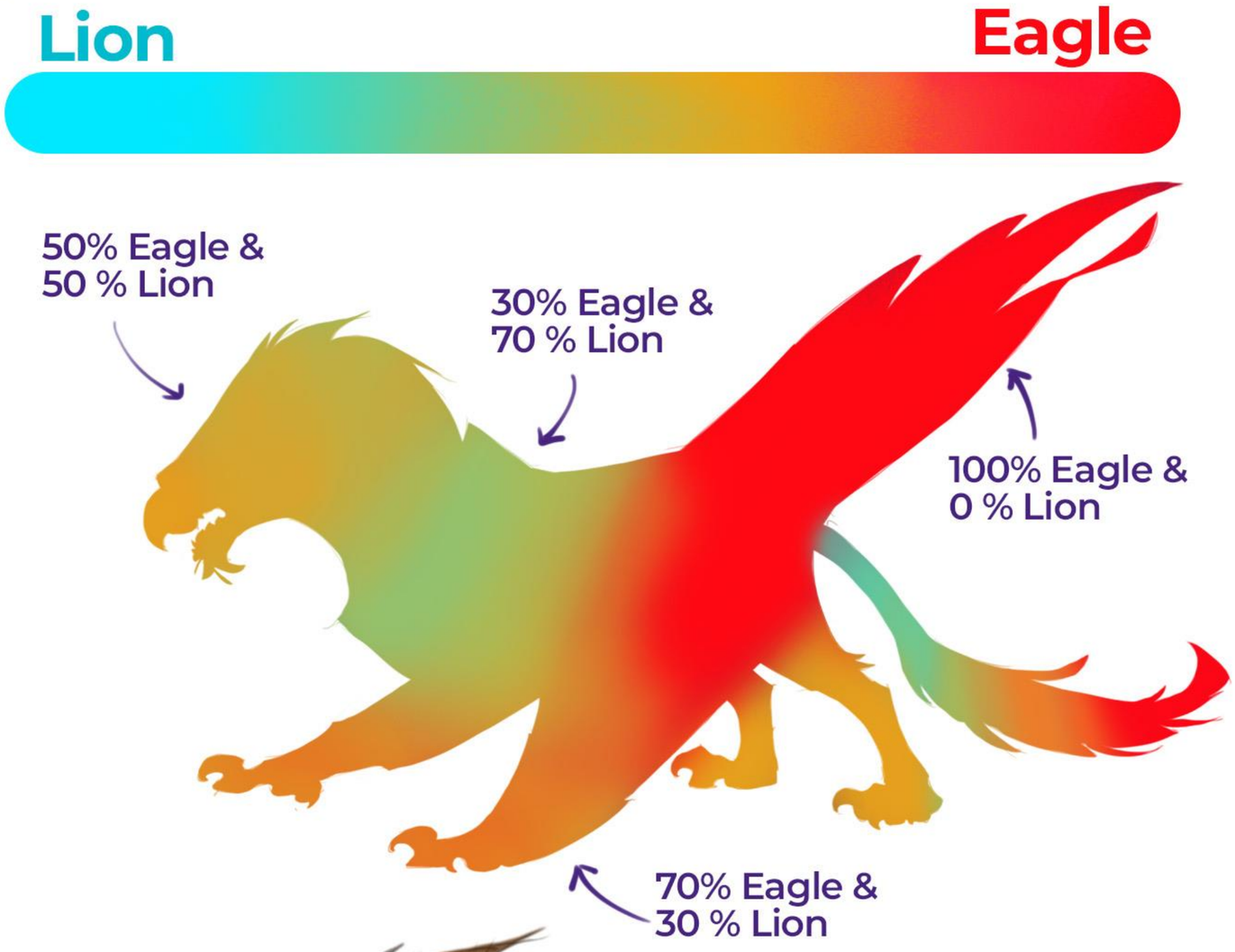

Mixed hybridization:
Blends specific animal traits throughout the body at varying degrees to create a more subtle fusion.

Learn more in this video

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Creature Design I (1/3)

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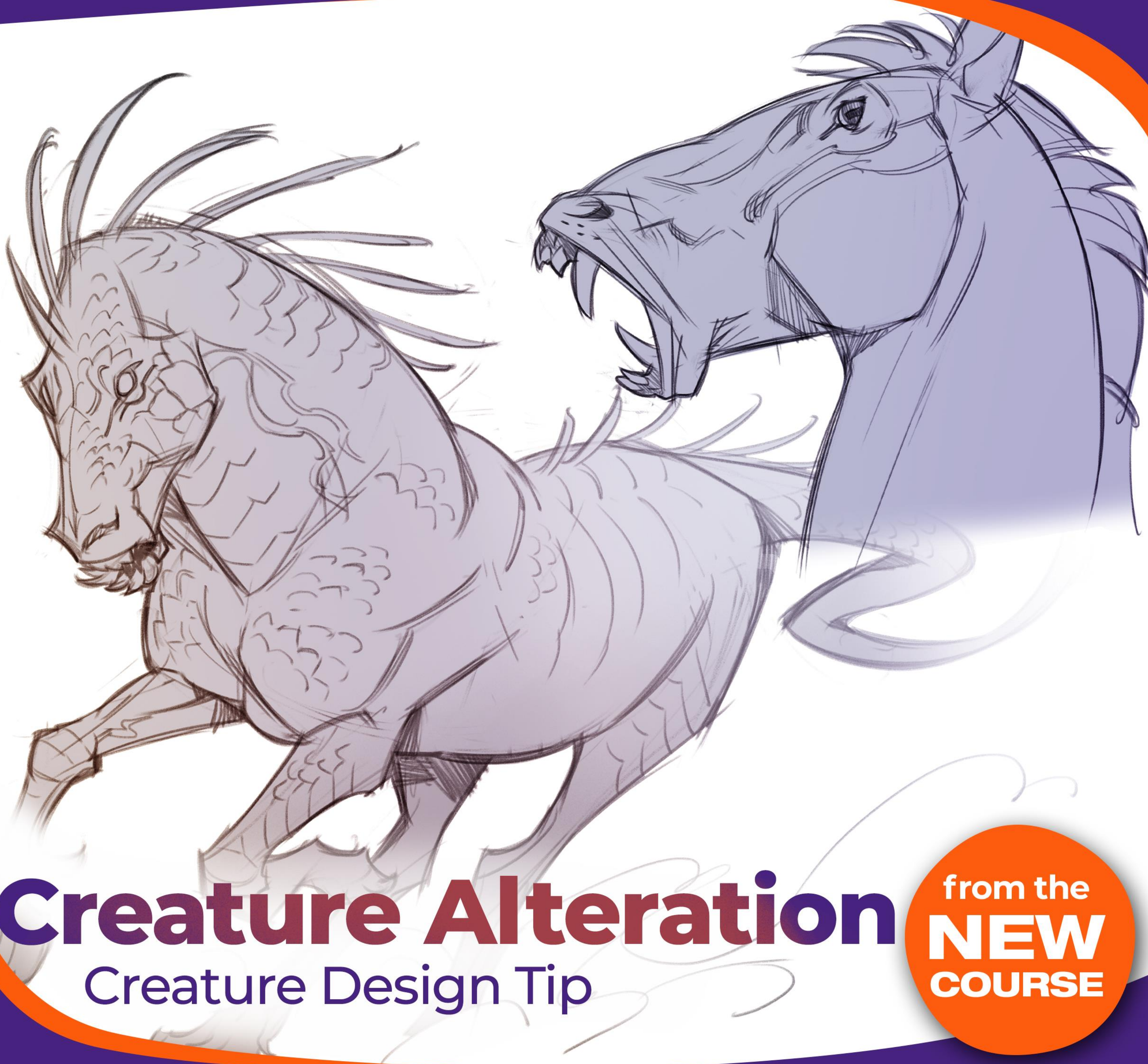

Creature Alteration

Creature Design Tip

from the NEW COURSE

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Creature Design I (2/3)

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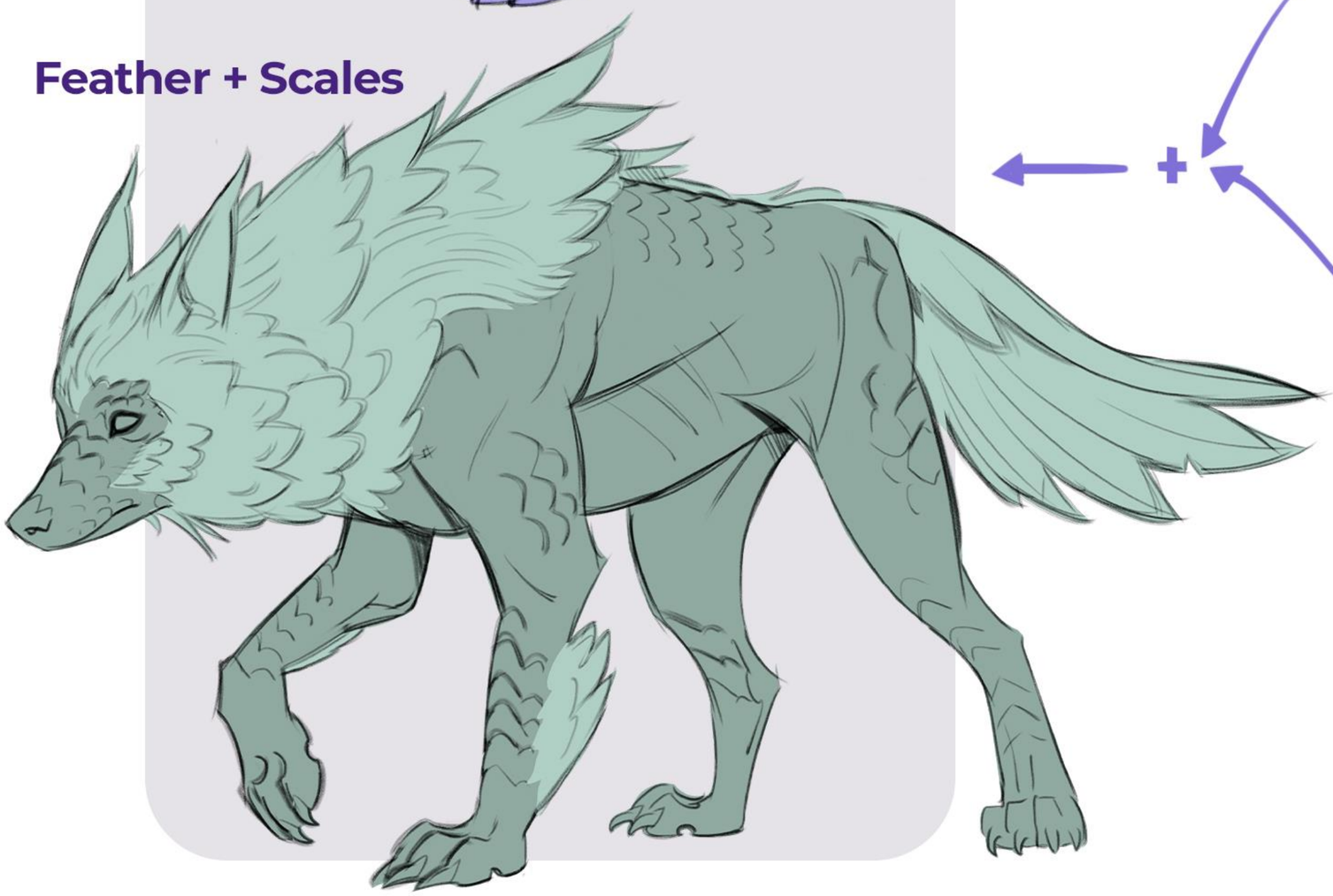
Alteration is about taking a specific element and **experimenting** with it. For example, we can take a wolf and replace its fur with something else.

These small changes can be profound and significantly alter the overall look.

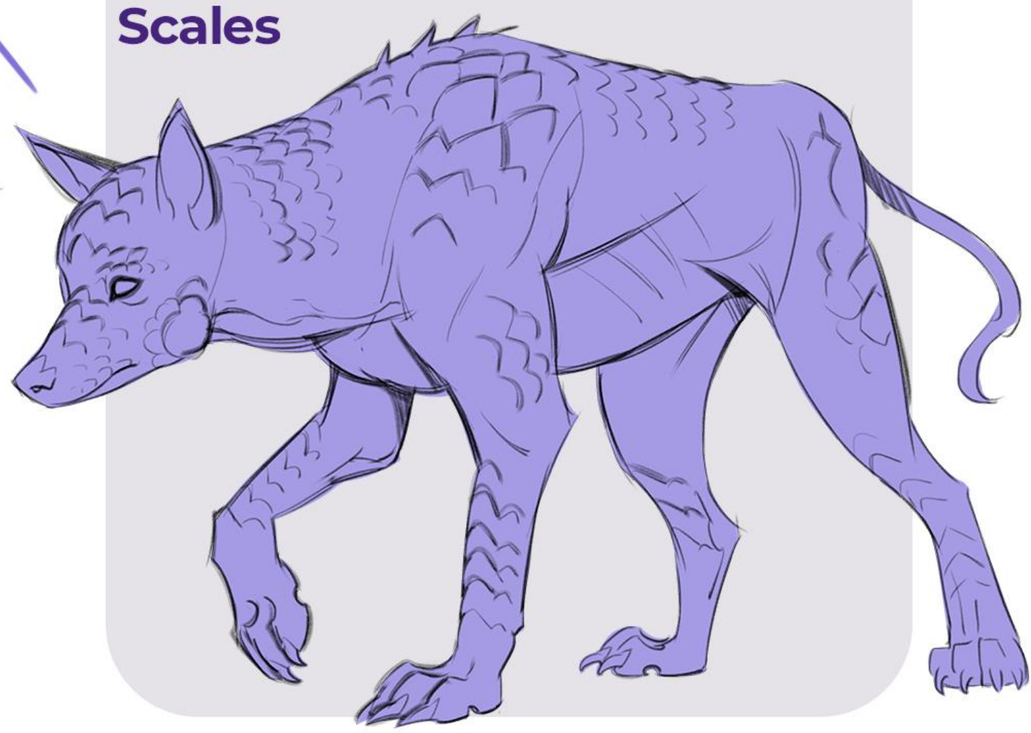
Fur

Feather

Feather + Scales



Scales



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Creature Design I (3/3)

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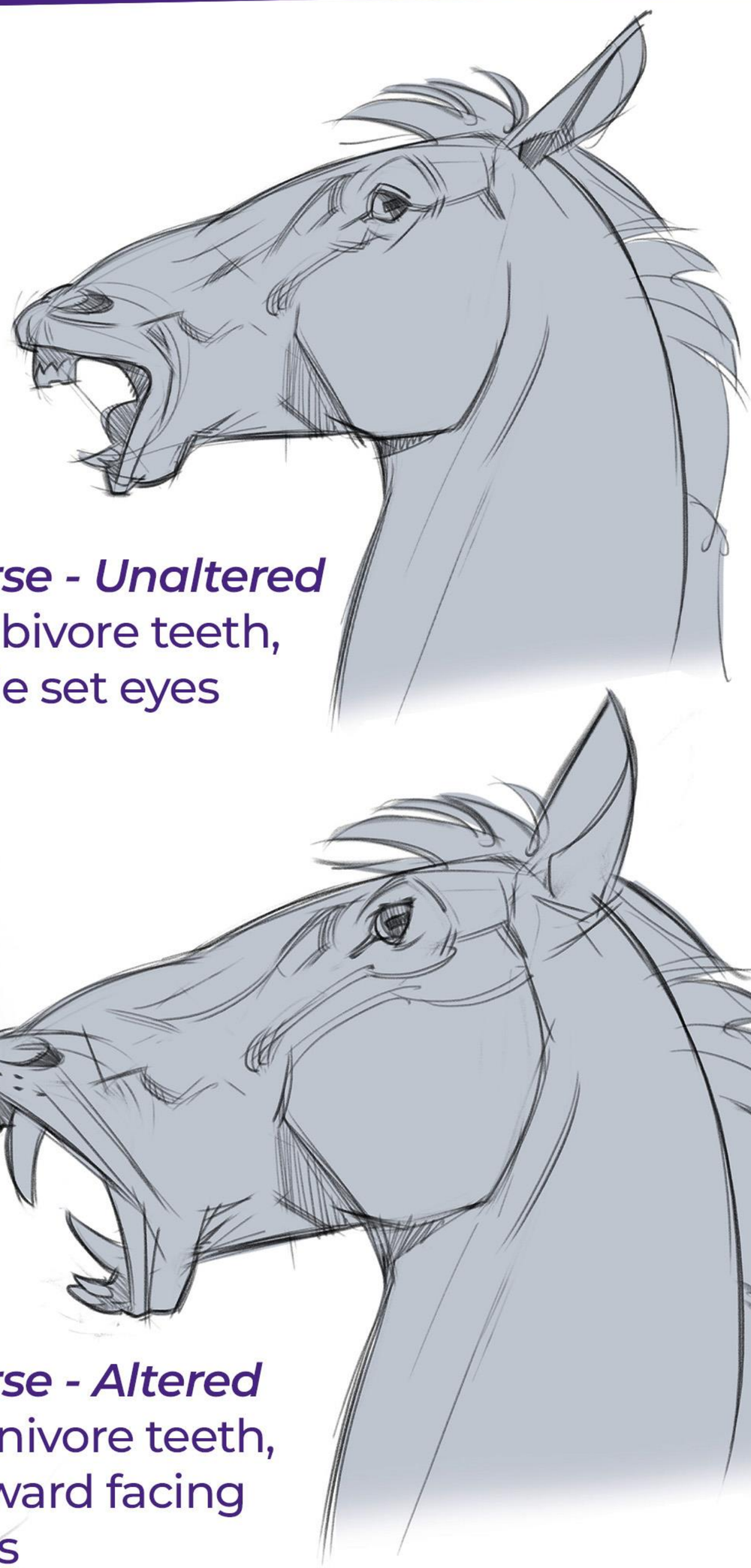
We can also alter elements such as tooth structure and eye orientation to make a herbivore appear more predatory.

Scales + Predatory features



Horse - Unaltered
Herbivore teeth, wide set eyes

Horse - Altered
Carnivore teeth, forward facing eyes

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Teeth Alteration

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Teeth Alteration (2/3)

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Teeth and Gums Color

We can take this dog as an example and replace its teeth with those of another animal. In this case, the mouth of a nonvenomous snake, like a tree boa, looks especially terrifying.

This simple change makes the dog feel completely different.

Remember, you can stylize and reimagine freely when doing experiments like this. Go wild!

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Teeth Alteration (3/3)

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Here’s another example.
It feels much more disarming compared to the tree boa’s teeth.
Changing just one element in a design can alter the entire feel.

The boa’s teeth look like they could do a lot more damage.

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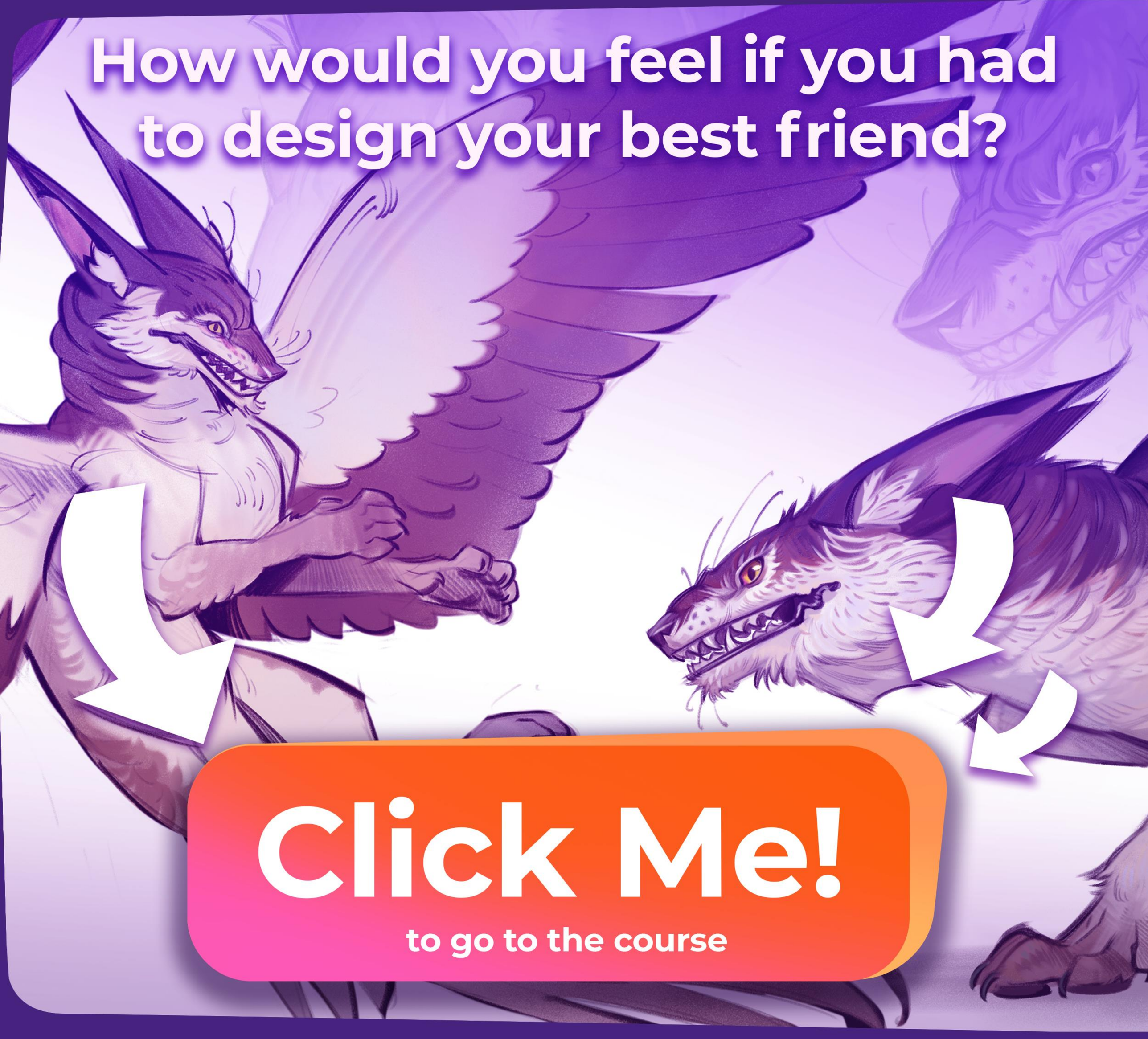
How would you feel if you had to design your best friend?



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Hornborn

Tips on Creature Design

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Hornborn (2/4)

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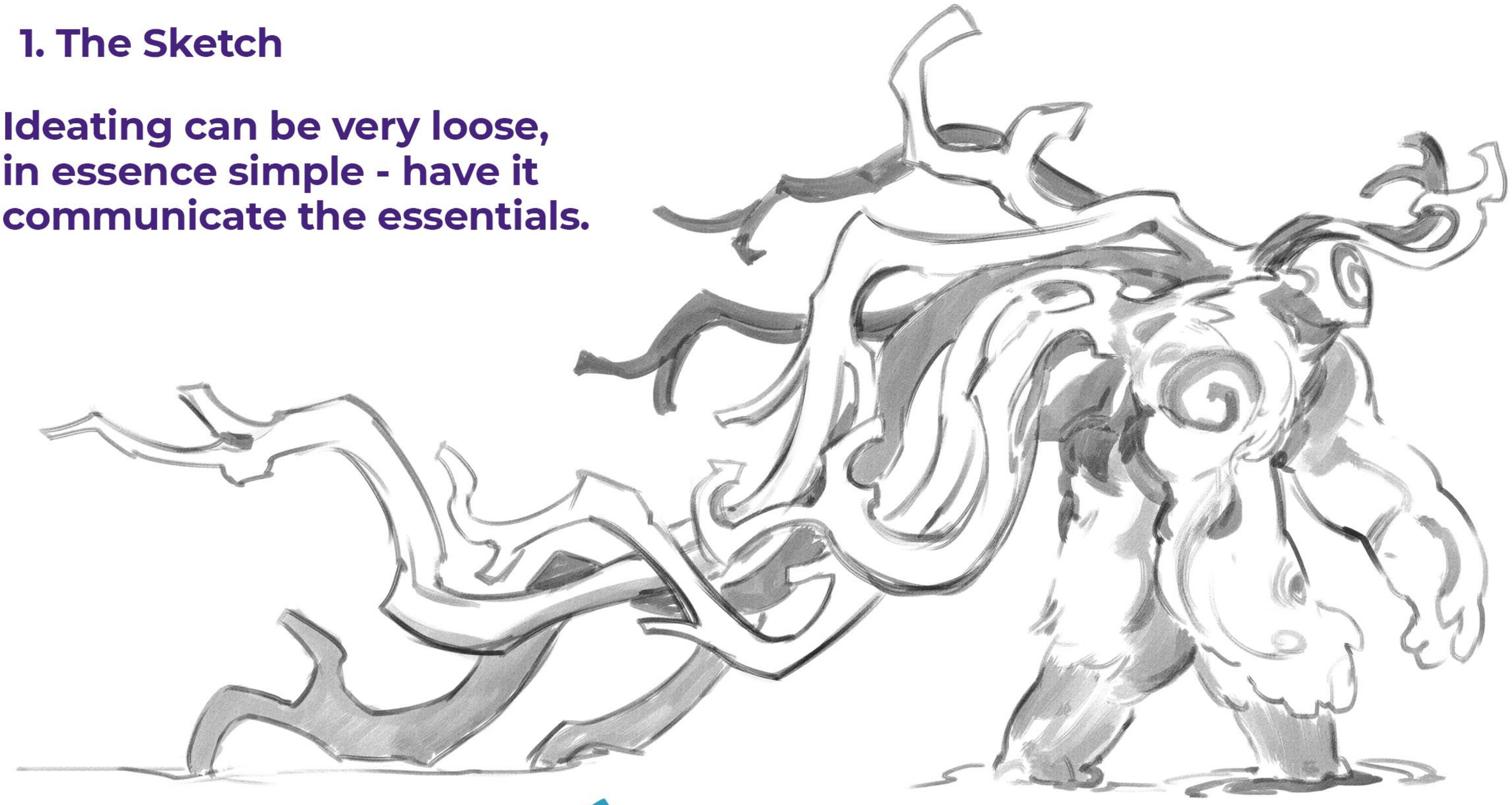
1. The Sketch

Ideating can be very loose, in essence simple - have it communicate the essentials.



2. Complexity vs Simplicity

Contrast in the first phase can be simple. In this case we have a contrast of Complexity vs Simplicity.

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Hornborn (3/4)

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Drawing, Details and Stories

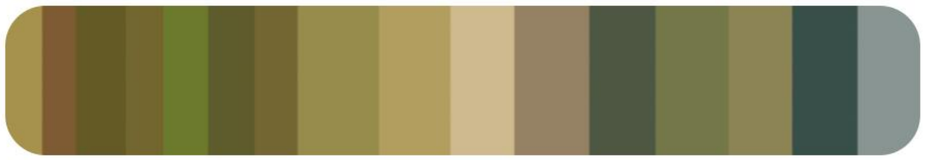
Drawing will relate to your ability, it is mostly craft, of course it can have some planning to it, but in general the technicality should blend with the craft.

Details - can go through 2 parts: descriptiveness and density. Some areas will have a higher density and some others will have a lower density - same principles apply to descriptiveness.

Color

Since it is a swamp-like creature, the focus goes on using swamp-like colors.
That means we will use greens, greys and earthy colors - this keeps consistency of the theme, and it gives us a sense of localization of this creature.
Any type of design created should have a correlation standard with the theme it is developed for.

Character Color



Background Color

Try it out!

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Design is there to clear misunderstandings, now start creating.

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Material Application

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Material Application (2/4)

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We can study materials such as gold, marble or anything and apply it for character and creature design later.

Gold: Shiny, reflective, and solid, with orange and yellow hues.

Oil: Shiny, reflective, and liquid, with dark values and purple accents.

Marble: Rocky, bumpy texture with a marbled pattern and light, creamy values.

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Material Application (3/4)

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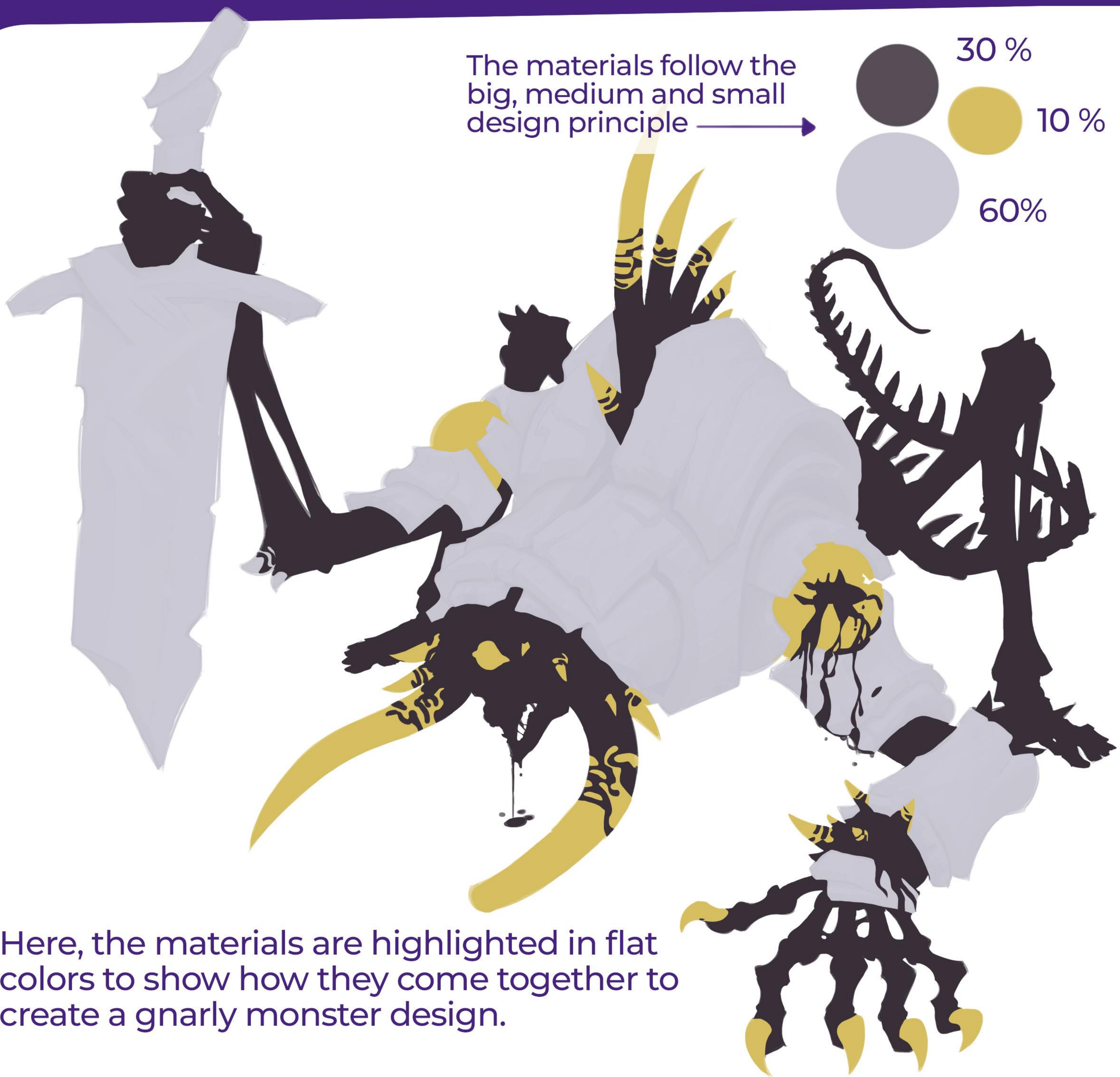
The materials follow the big, medium and small design principle



Here, the materials are highlighted in flat colors to show how they come together to create a gnarly monster design.

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Material Application (4/4)

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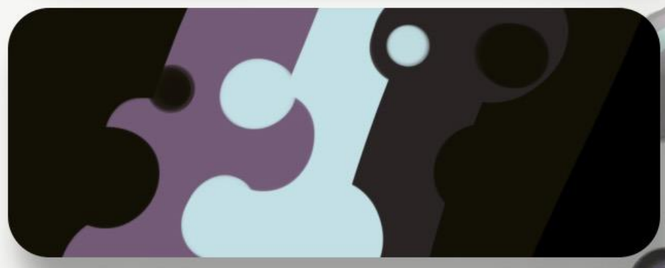
Color Picking

Marble

Gold



Oil

By understanding different materials and making bold design decisions, we can create unique designs that people haven’t seen before.

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Camera Angles

Tips on Environment Design

from the
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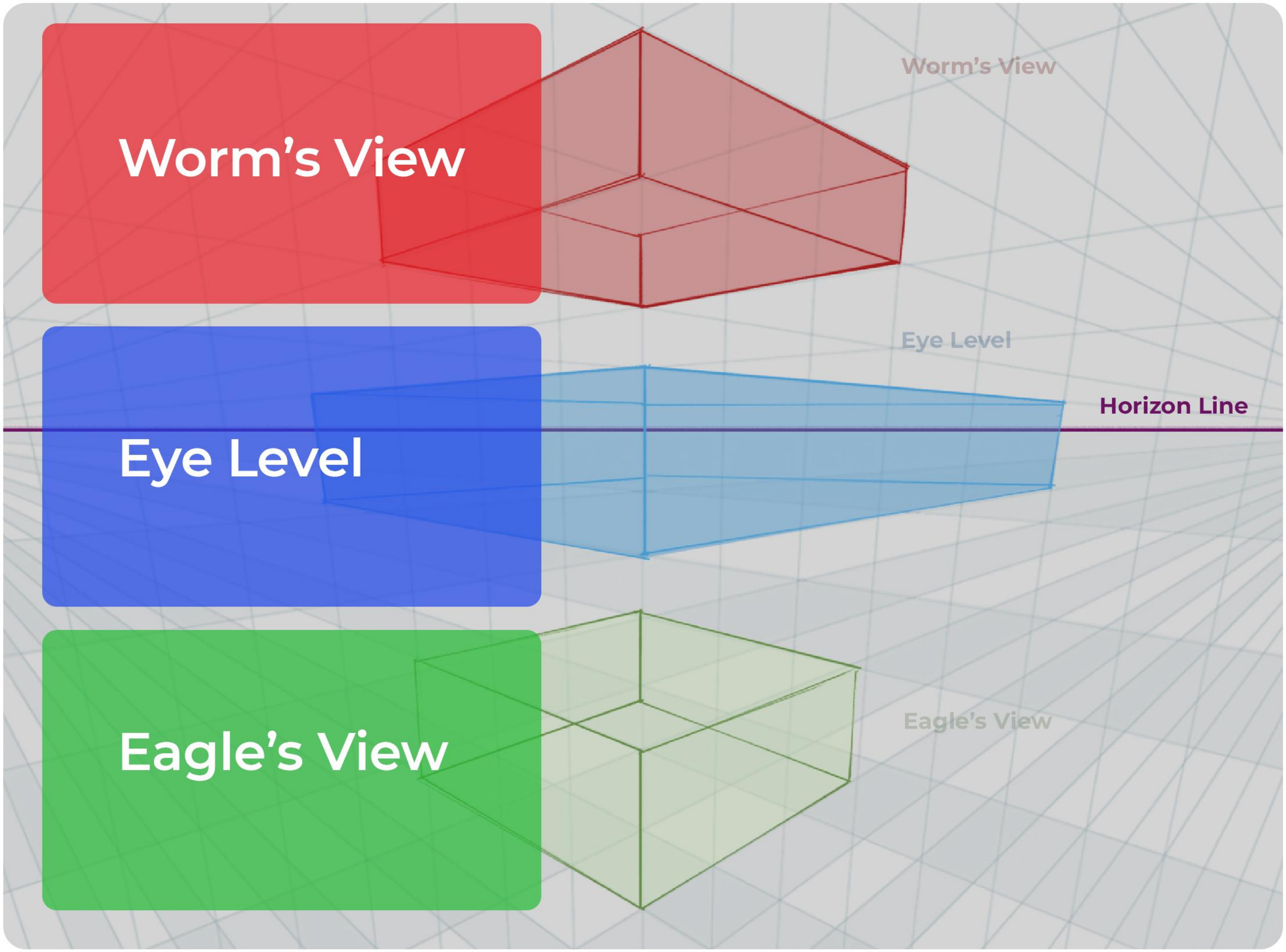
Let us understand the basics



Think about this - whenever you have a split in the environment, you need to understand that each screen we see represents a potential camera angle choice. Each panel bounds the view of the camera.

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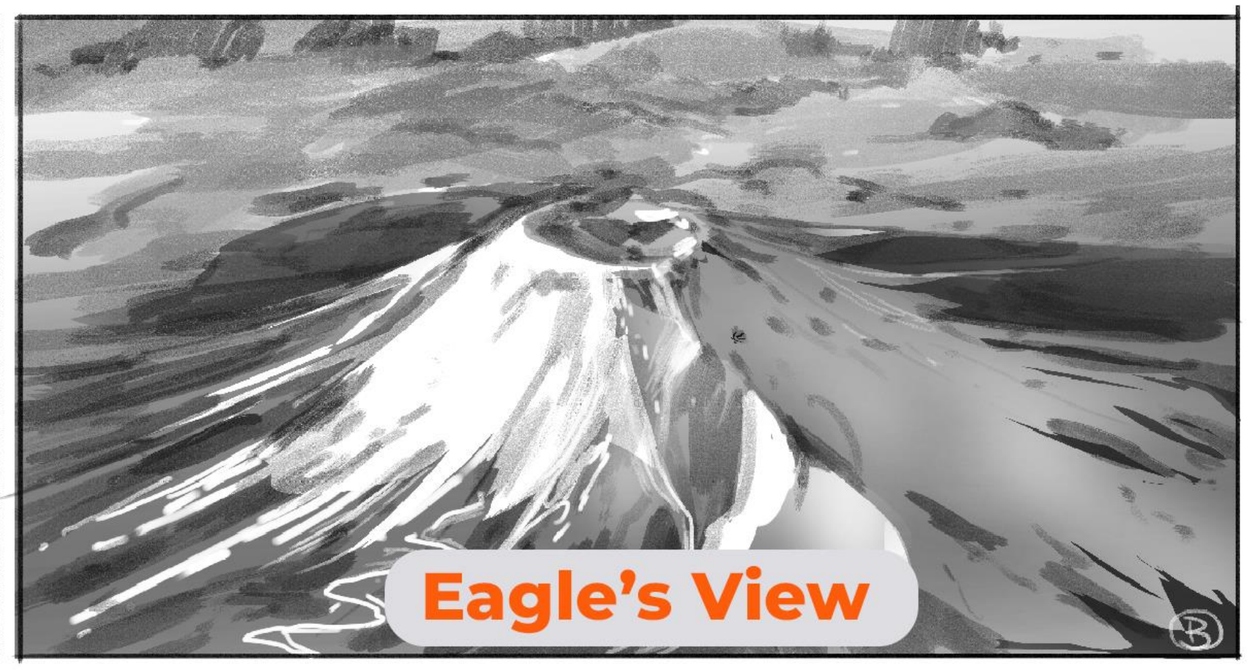
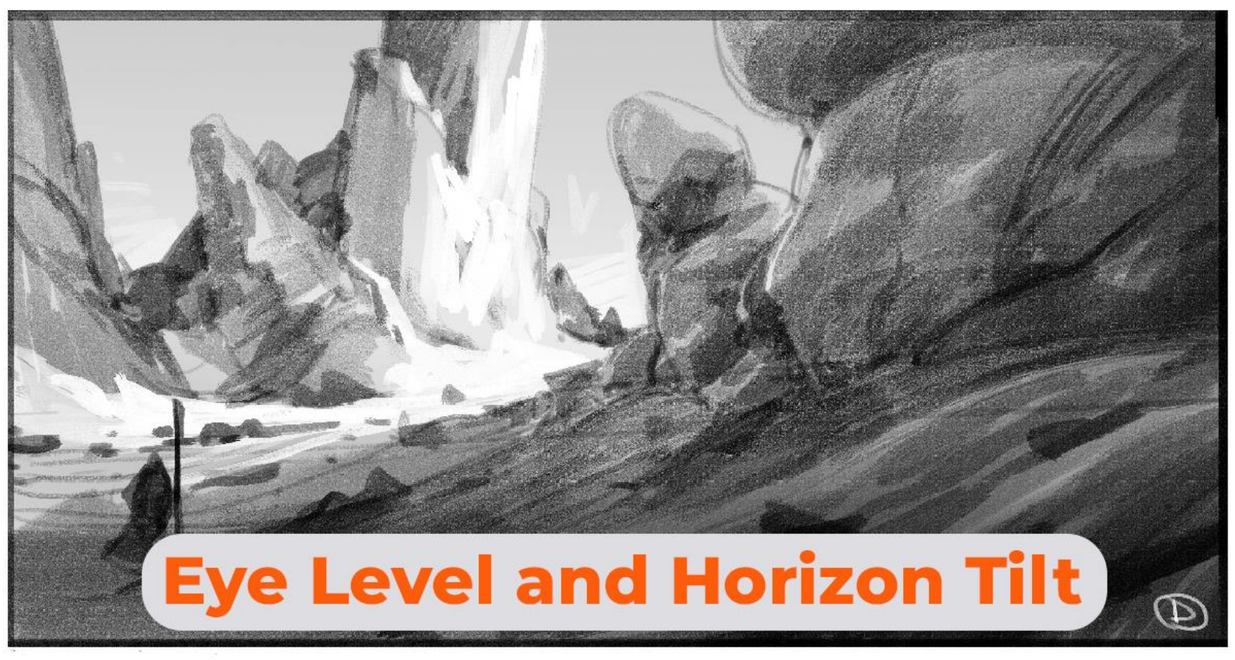
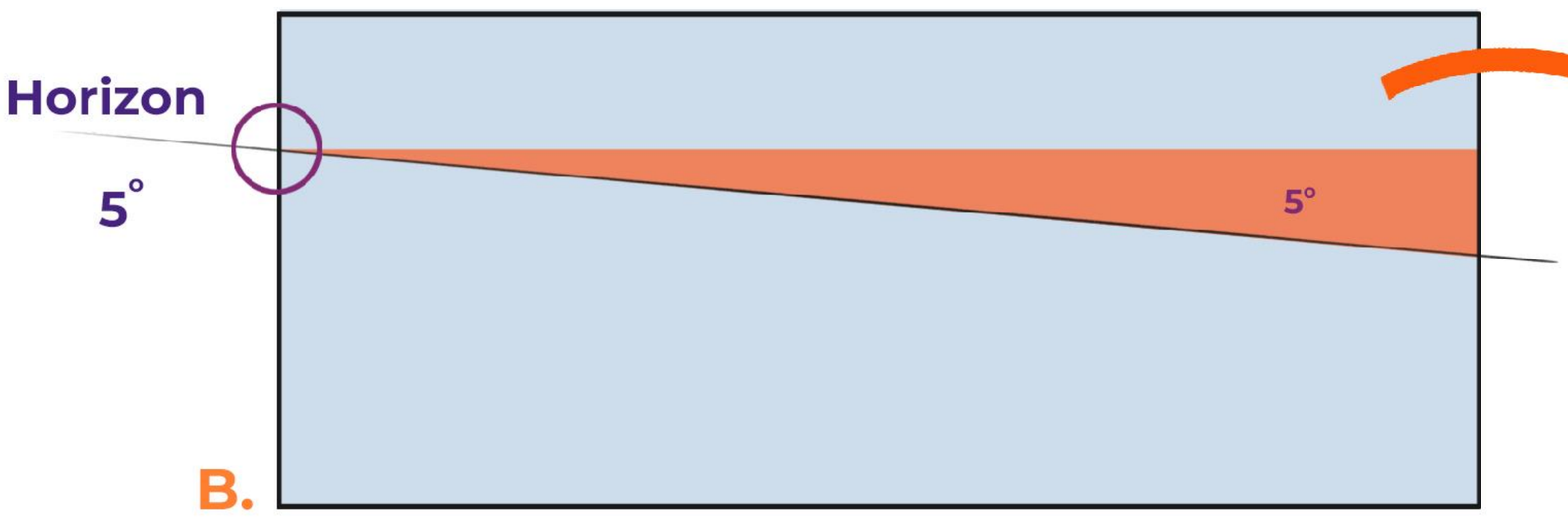
Let us check how angles look in action







The Angle Tilt of the Horizon can influence dramatism, uplift and even action.

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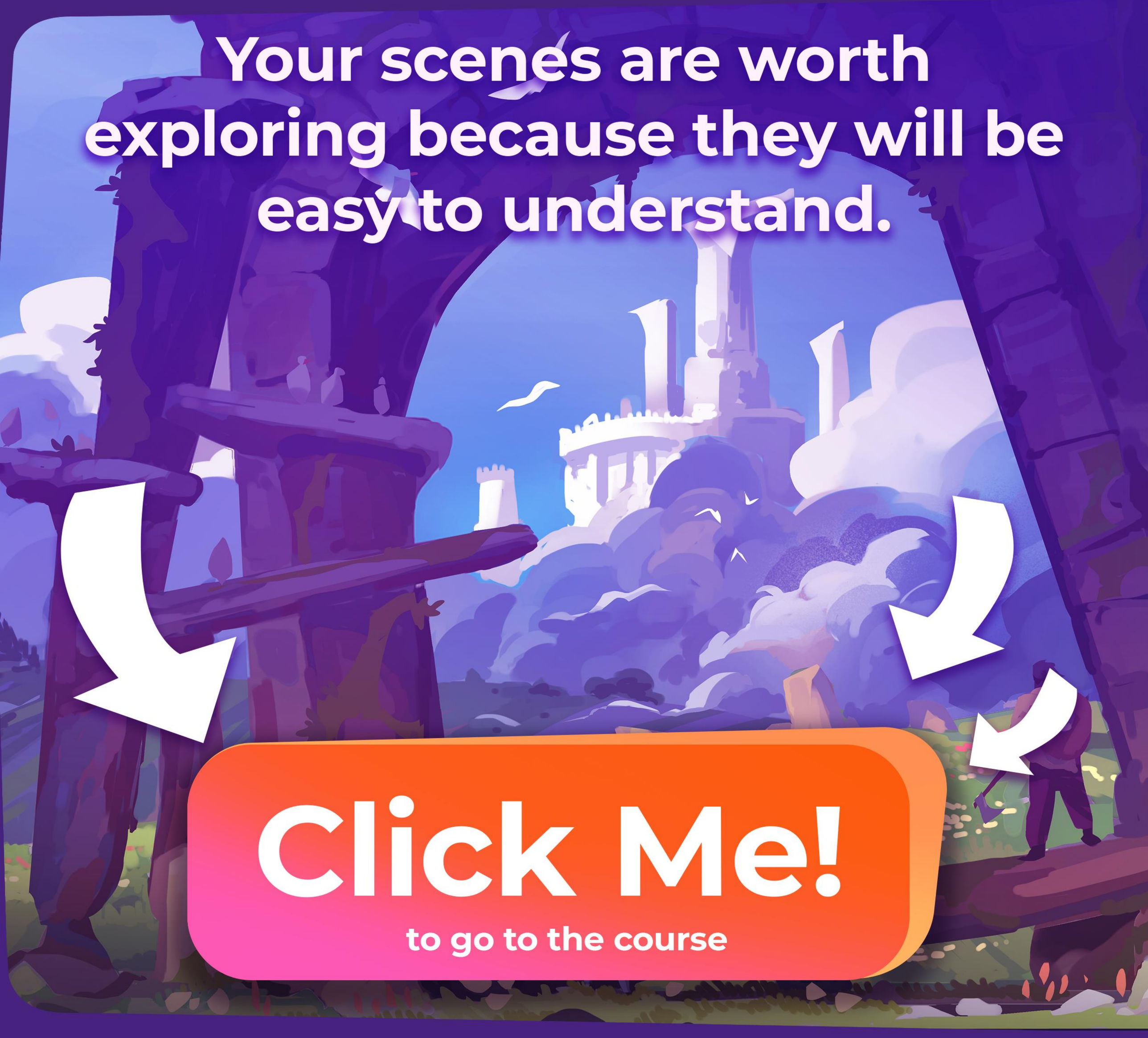
Your scenes are worth exploring because they will be easy to understand.



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Grassland Biome

Tips on Environment Design

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Let us do a breakdown

1.Referencing

2.Color Palette

3.Contrast

Color Palette

Value Contrast

Having a clear breakdown will help you to adjust all essential aspects of your biome.

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Environment Concept Art I (3/3)

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Let us check what the grasslands look like

Open, rolling fields with tall grasses, scattered trees, and expansive skies.

As a mood, it feels peaceful, nostalgic, or exposed – can be used for either hope or threat, depending on weather and scale.

House of the Dreamer

Tips on Design

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House of the Dreamer (2/4)

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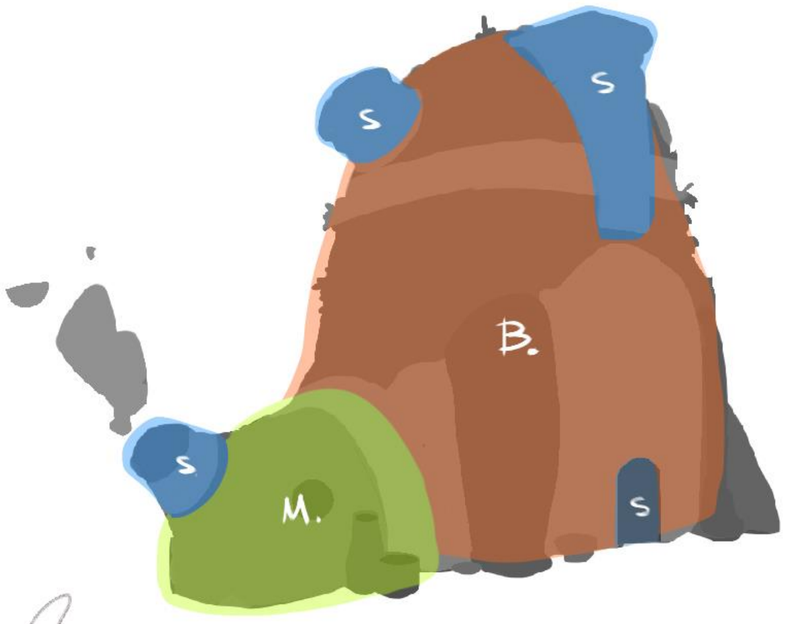
Simple process: we get to make the sketch - then we move to the silhouette - and then build the base colors.

Use Big-Medium-Small for your structures.

Base Colors



The Sketch

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House of the Dreamer (3/4)

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Readability

There is a soft slight texture on the building after adding the color base.

Storytelling

In the rendering process you can make sure to add some characters, it creates a better scale and overall storytelling.

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House of the Dreamer (4/4)

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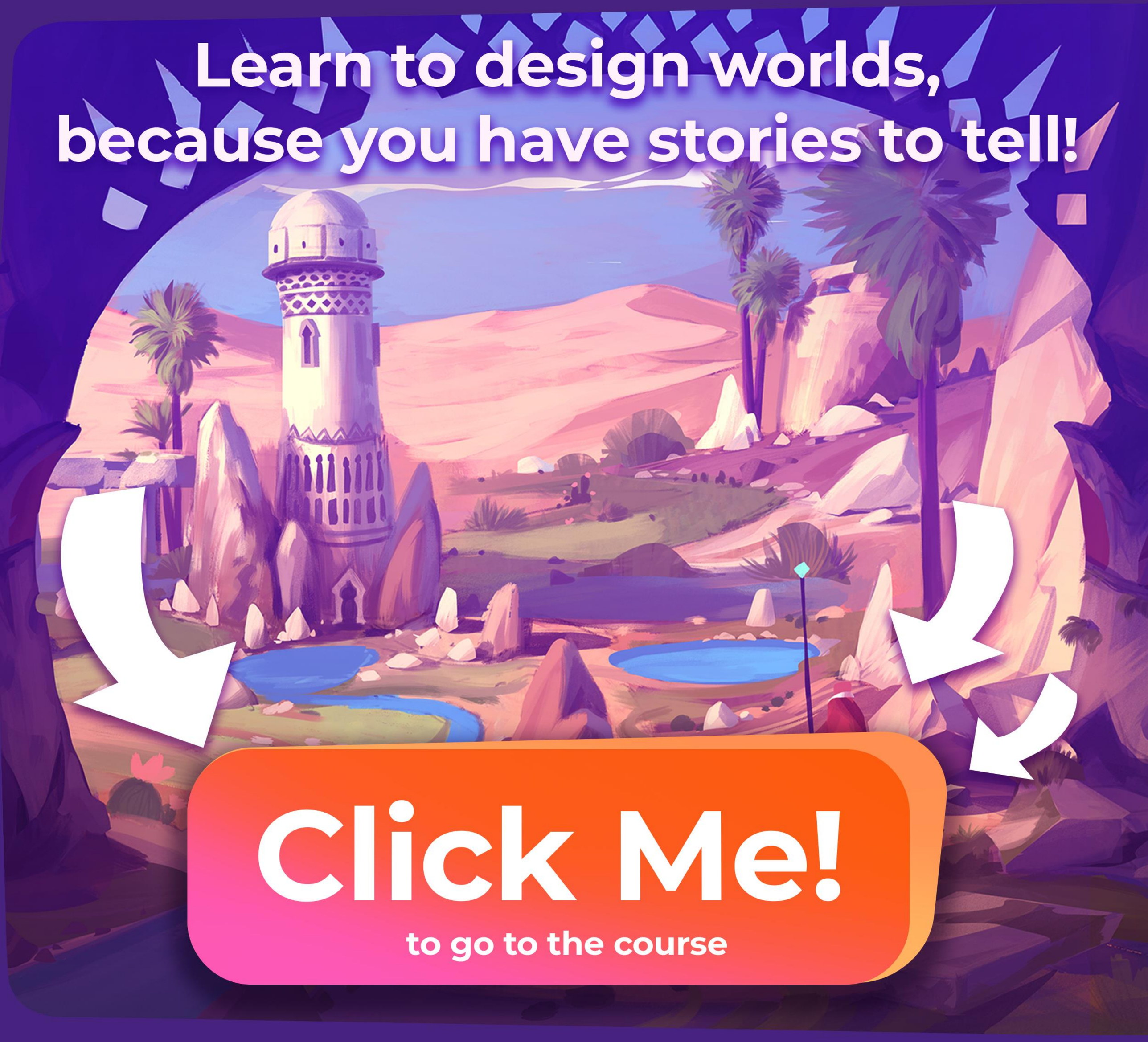
Learn to design worlds, because you have stories to tell!



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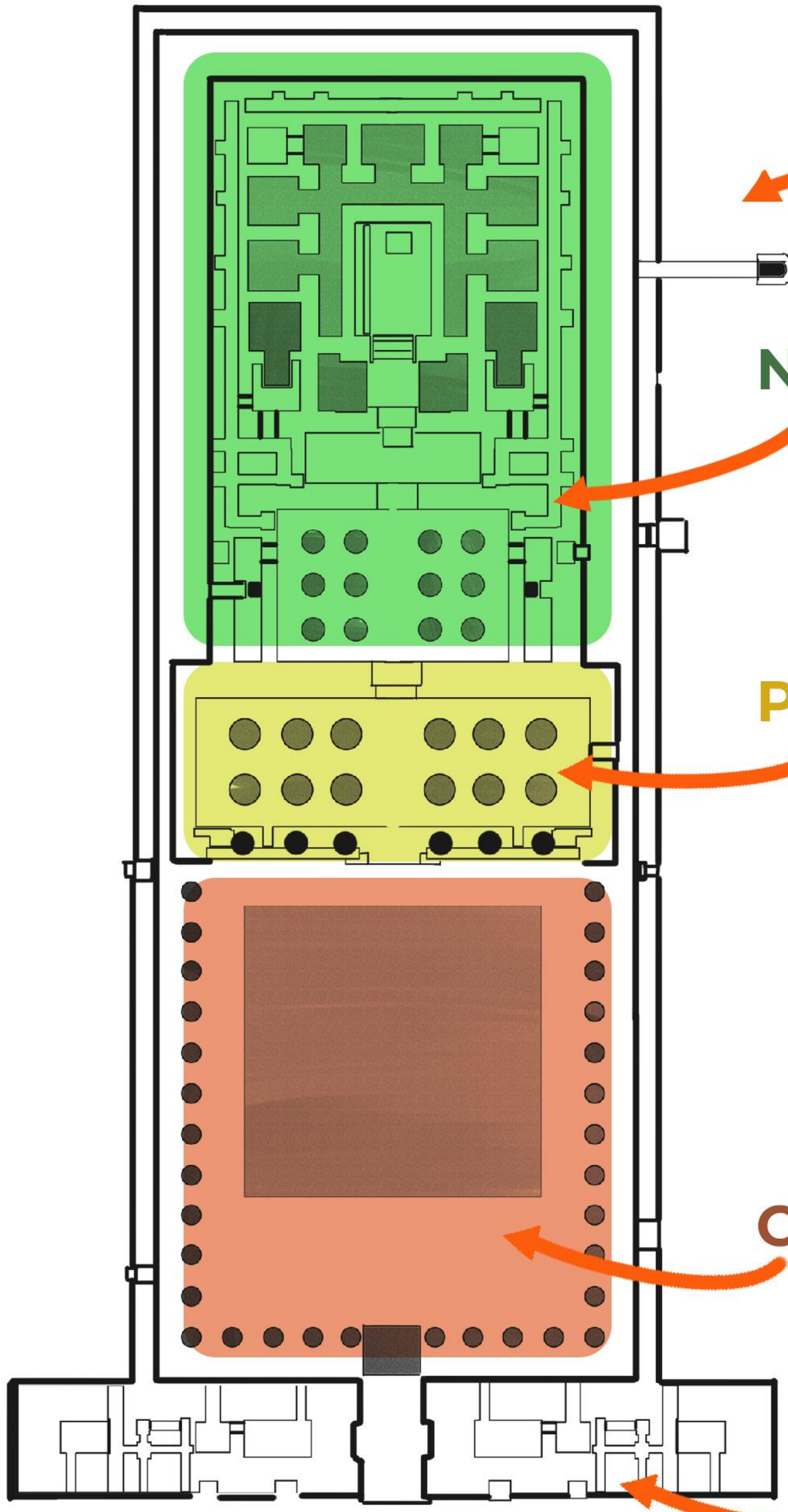
Ancient Egypt

Tips on Environment Design

from the **NEW COURSE**

Let us do a breakdown

Temple Plan - Edfu

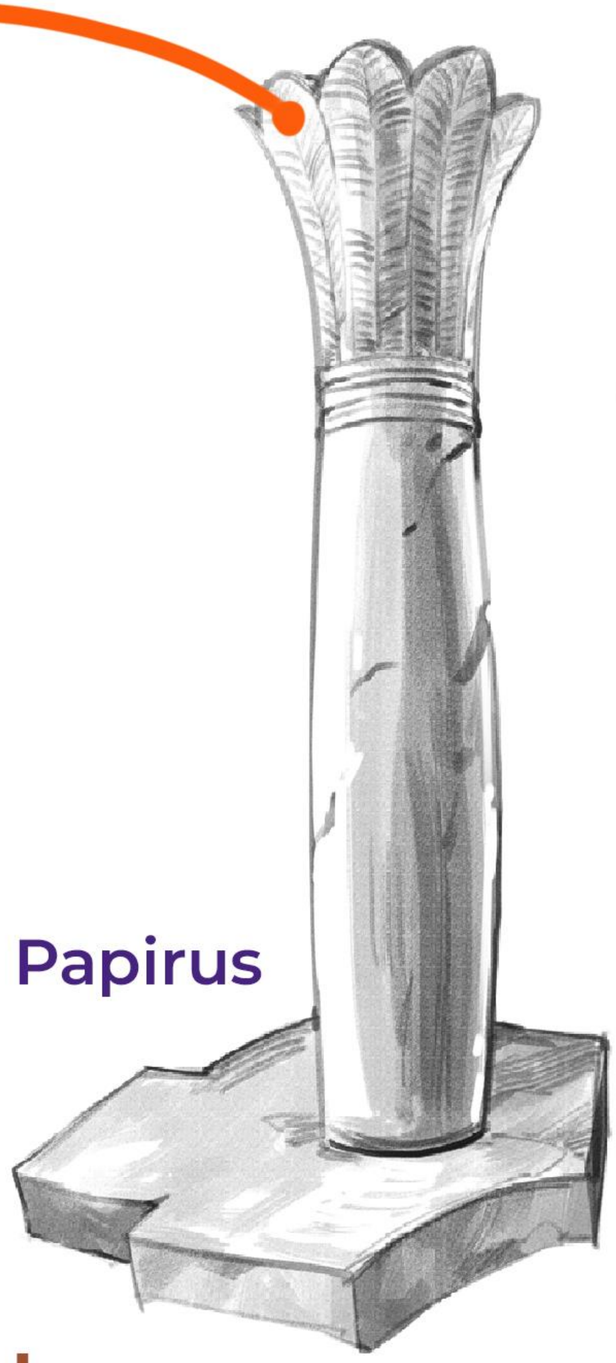


Naos

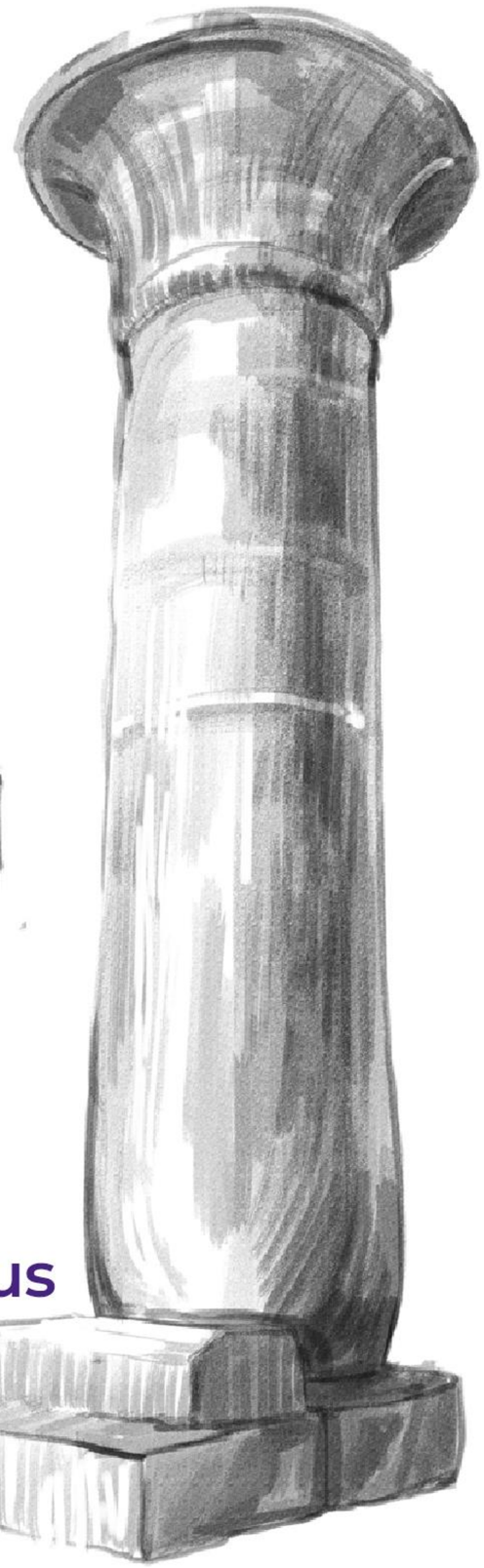
Pronaos

Courtyard

Pylon



Papirus



Lotus

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Environment Concept Art II (3/3)

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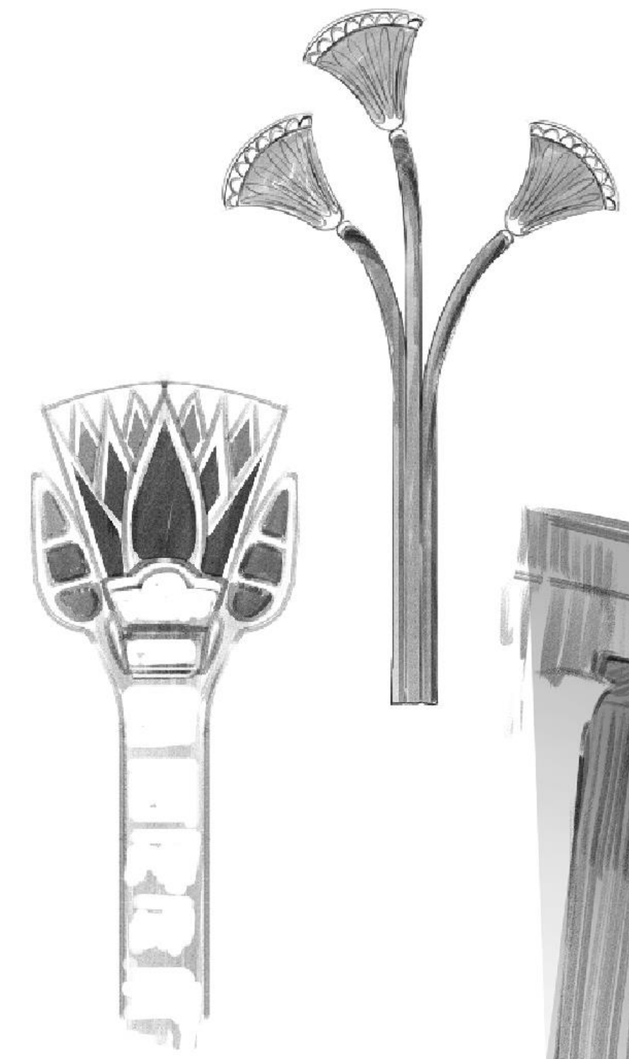
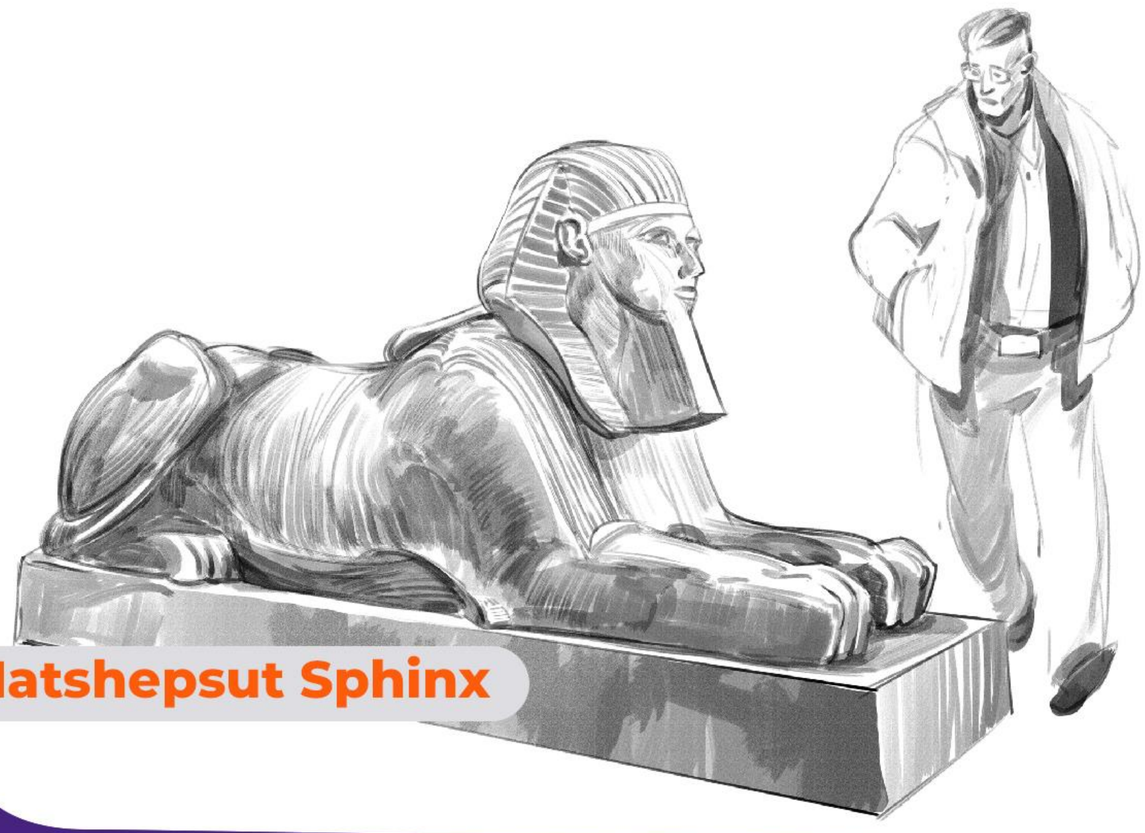
Decorative Motifs



Edfu Temple



Hatshepsut Sphinx

Sketch as much as you can, to get the best understanding of the world you are trying to make. This way, you will always stay ahead in making leaps of how Ancient Architecture works.

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Buildings are cornerstones of civilizations, and environments are alive when structures appear.

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Ancient Helmets

Tips on Design and Story

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Ancient Helmets (2/4)

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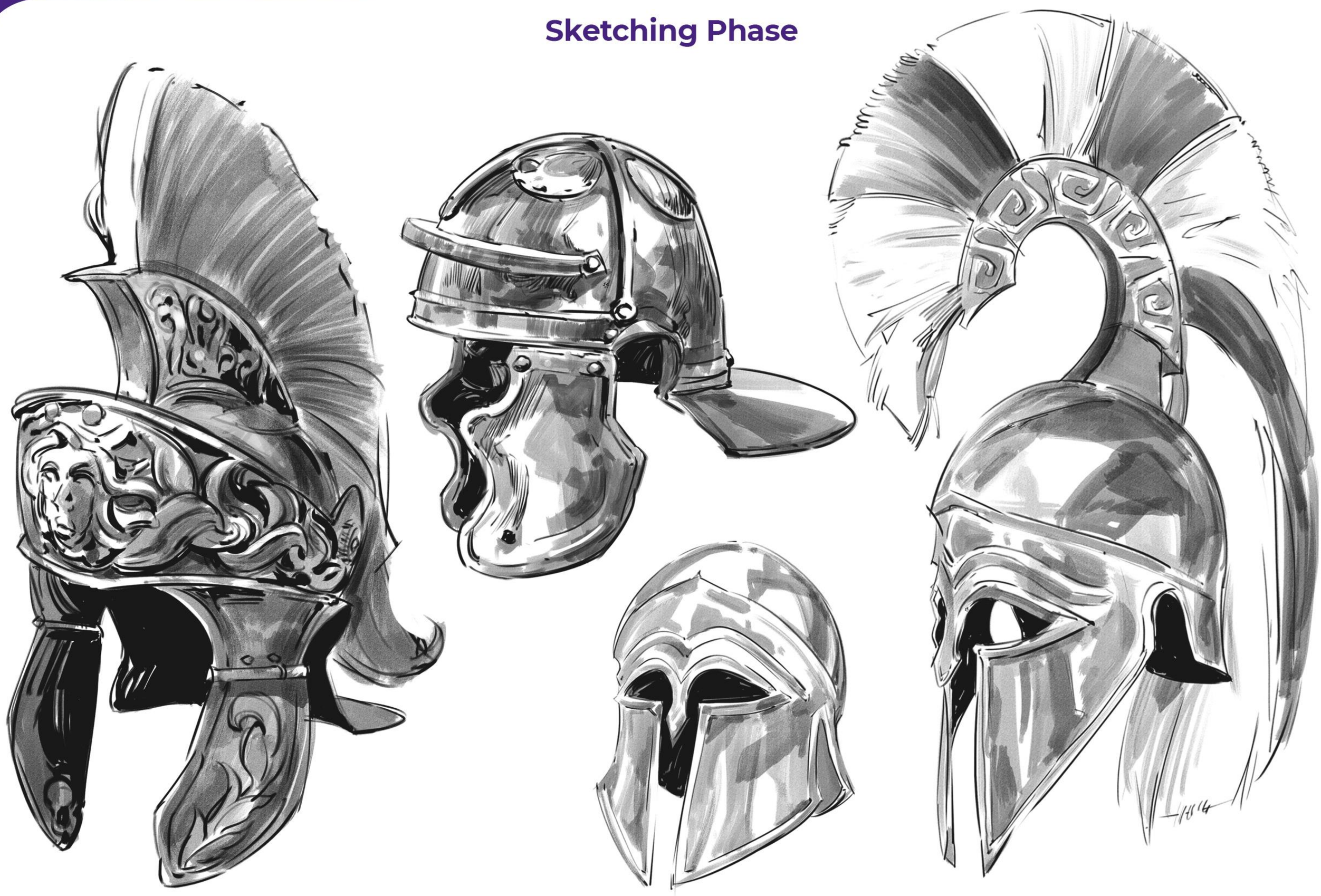
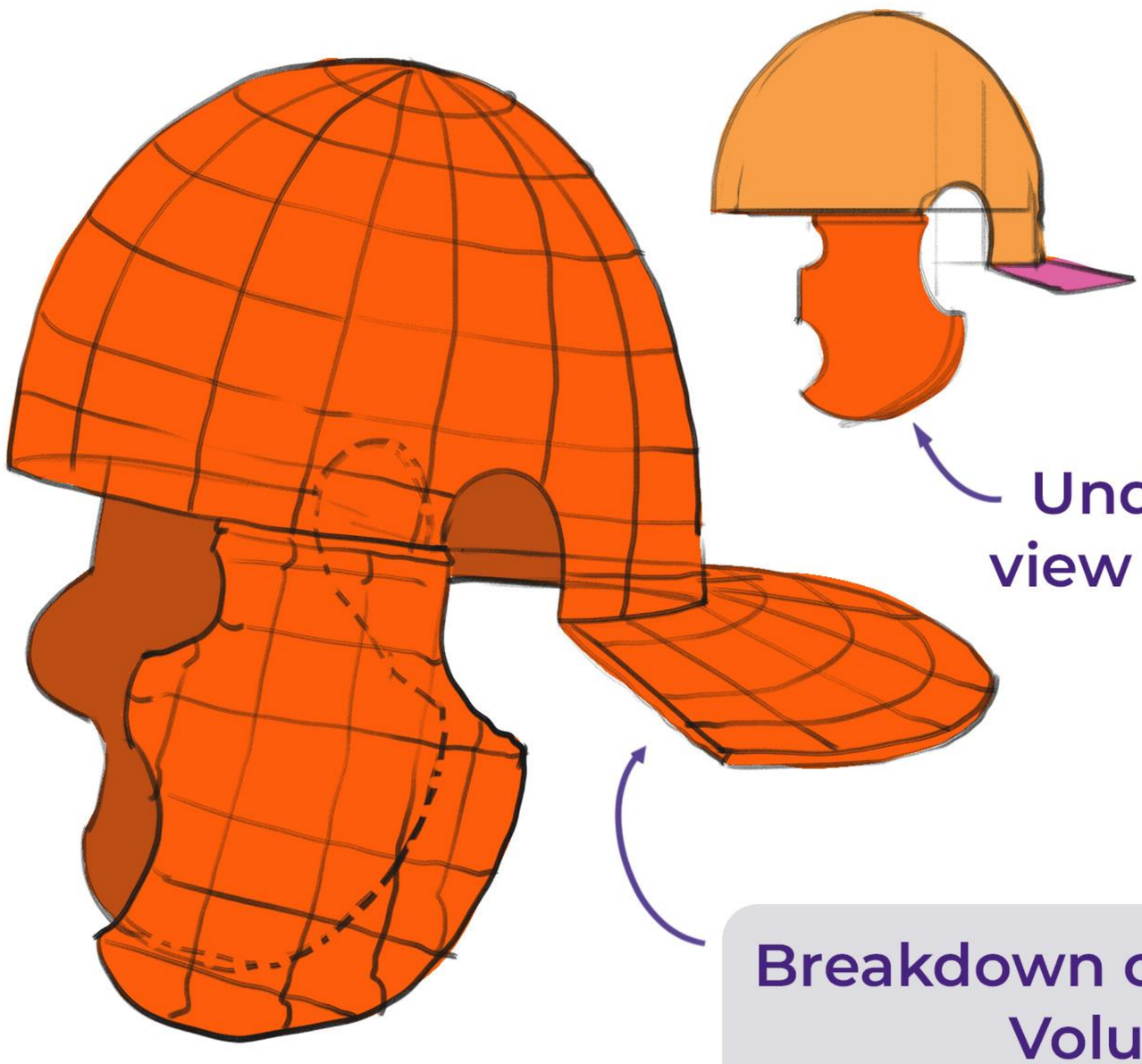
Sketching Phase

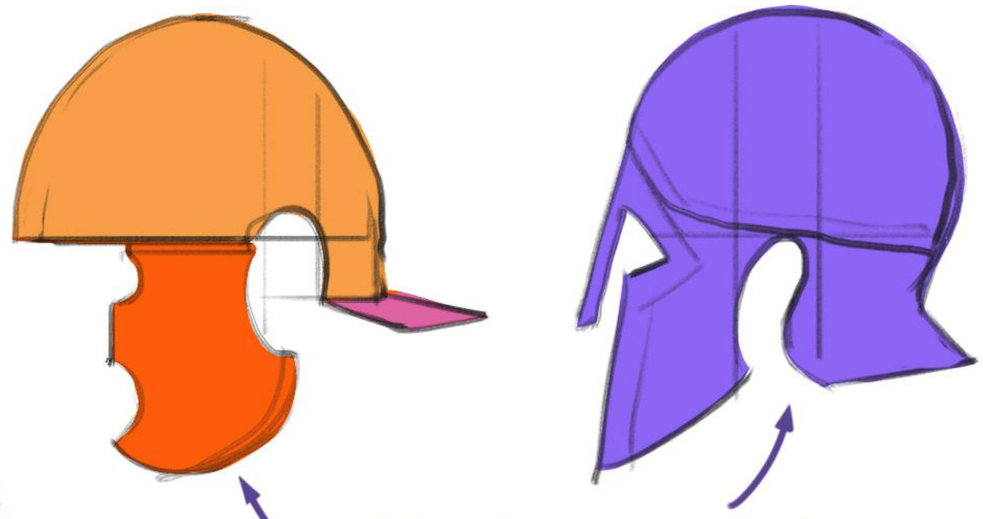


In the first phase, we sketch a bit. On the left side, we have some Roman helmets - on the right side, we have Greek helmets.

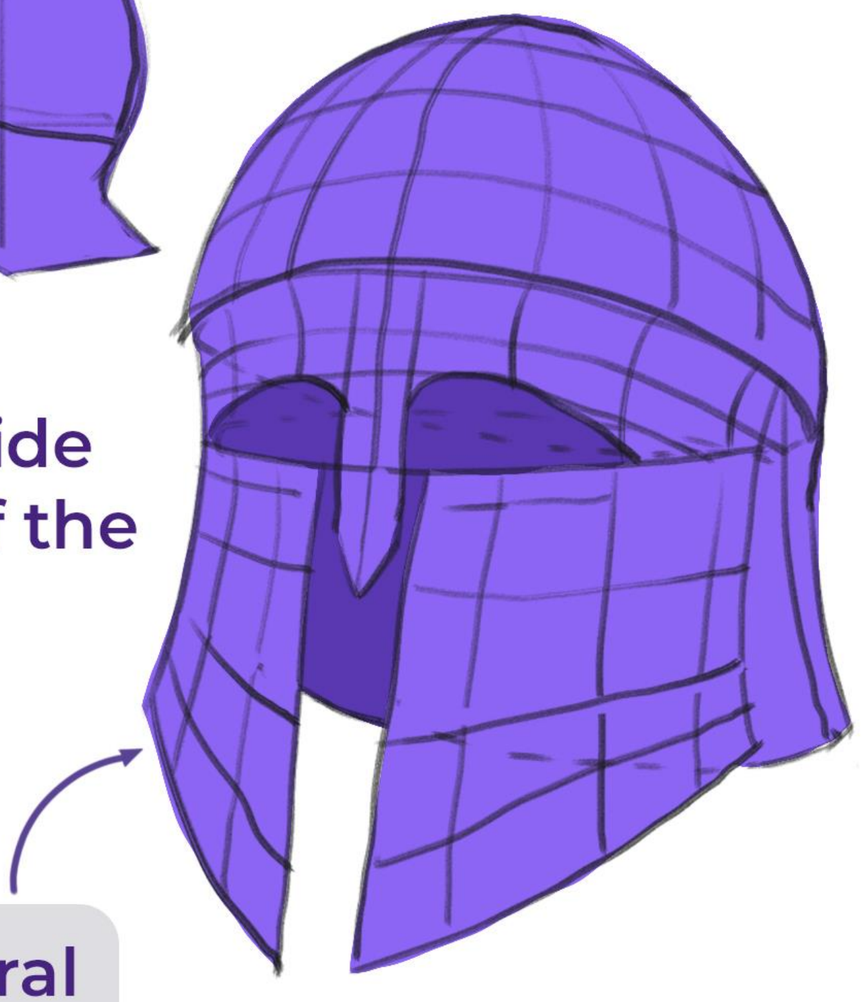
Sketch to get the feel of the Design

Let us go into Structure





Undestand side view design of the helmet



Breakdown of structural Volume

Structure is key to understanding how this helmet is built; the build itself influences the final design.

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Ancient Helmets (4/4)

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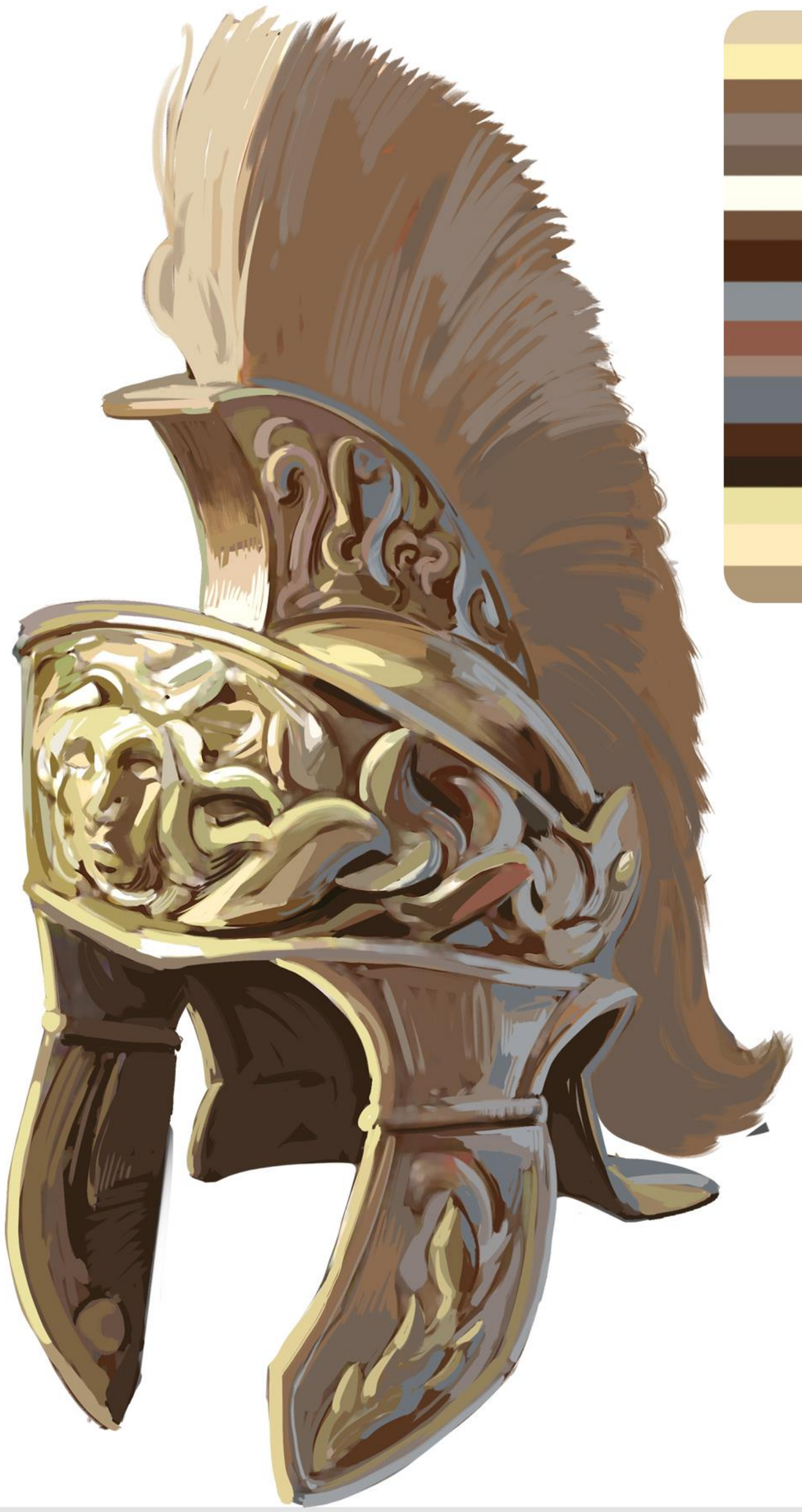
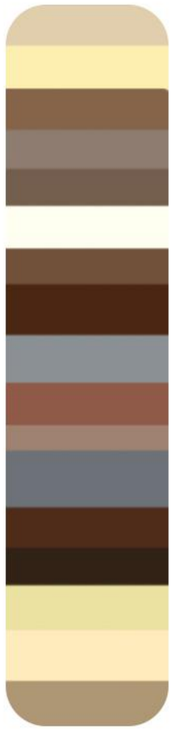
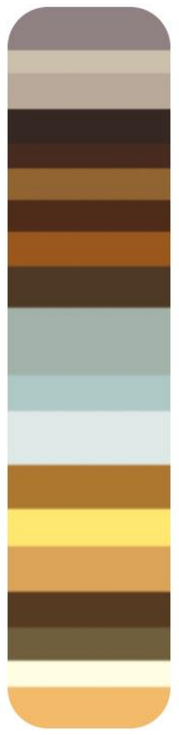




Gold Colors

The color on the Greek helmet is hinting more towards gold, although it's not gold - it's some sort of polished bronze and it reflects gold-like colors because of light.

VS



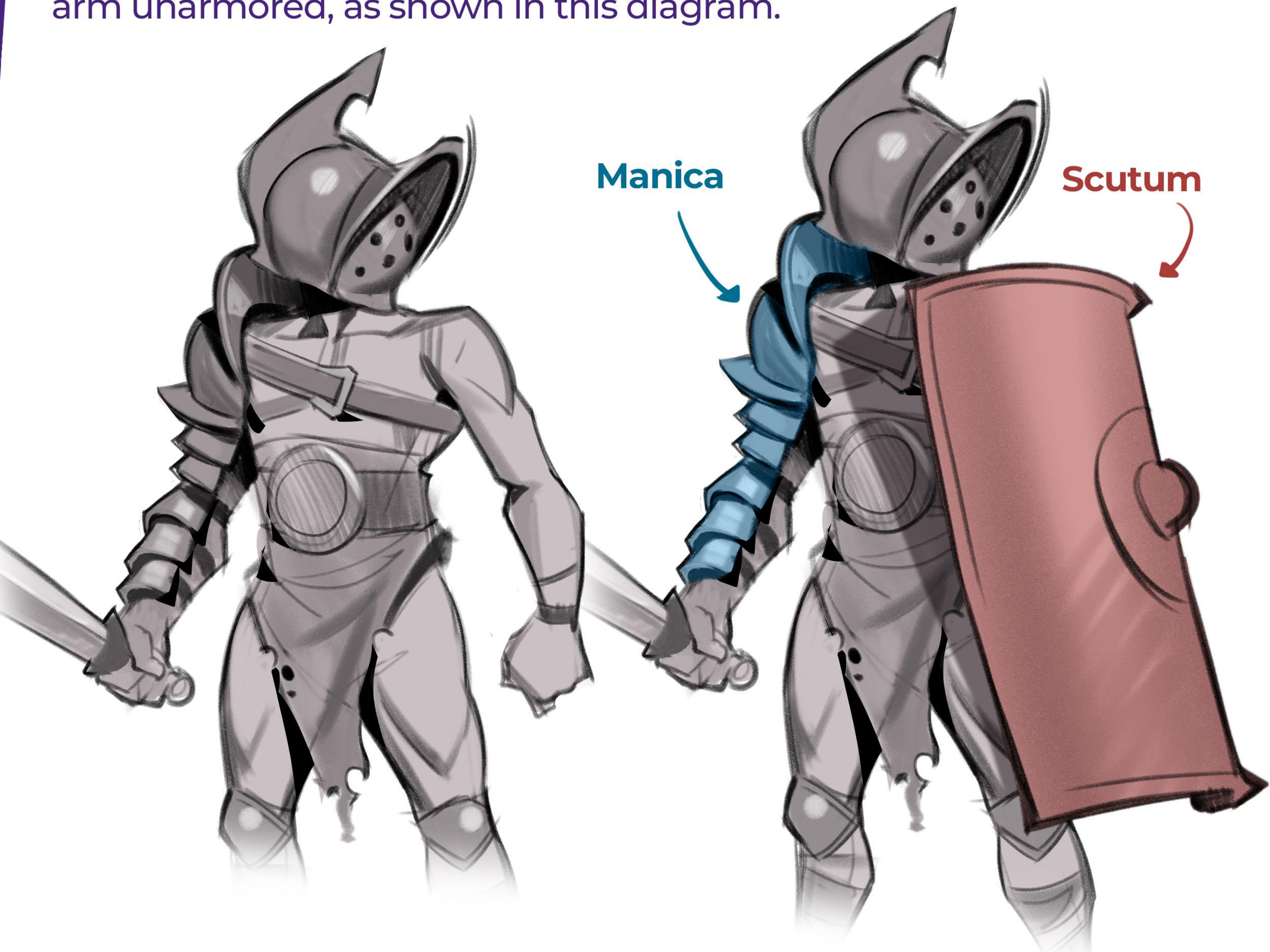
Bronze Colors

The color difference is done on purpose to showcase variety in the represented design itself. For the Roman helmet, I went more for a bronze color.

Stylized Armor

Manica Arm Guard

The **manica** is an arm guard made of overlapping metal or leather plates, it provided flexibility without sacrificing defense. Unlike war armor, this gladiatorial armor was **asymmetric**—fighters relied on their large scutum (shield) for additional protection, leaving the shield arm unarmored, as shown in this diagram.



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Stylized Armor (3/4)

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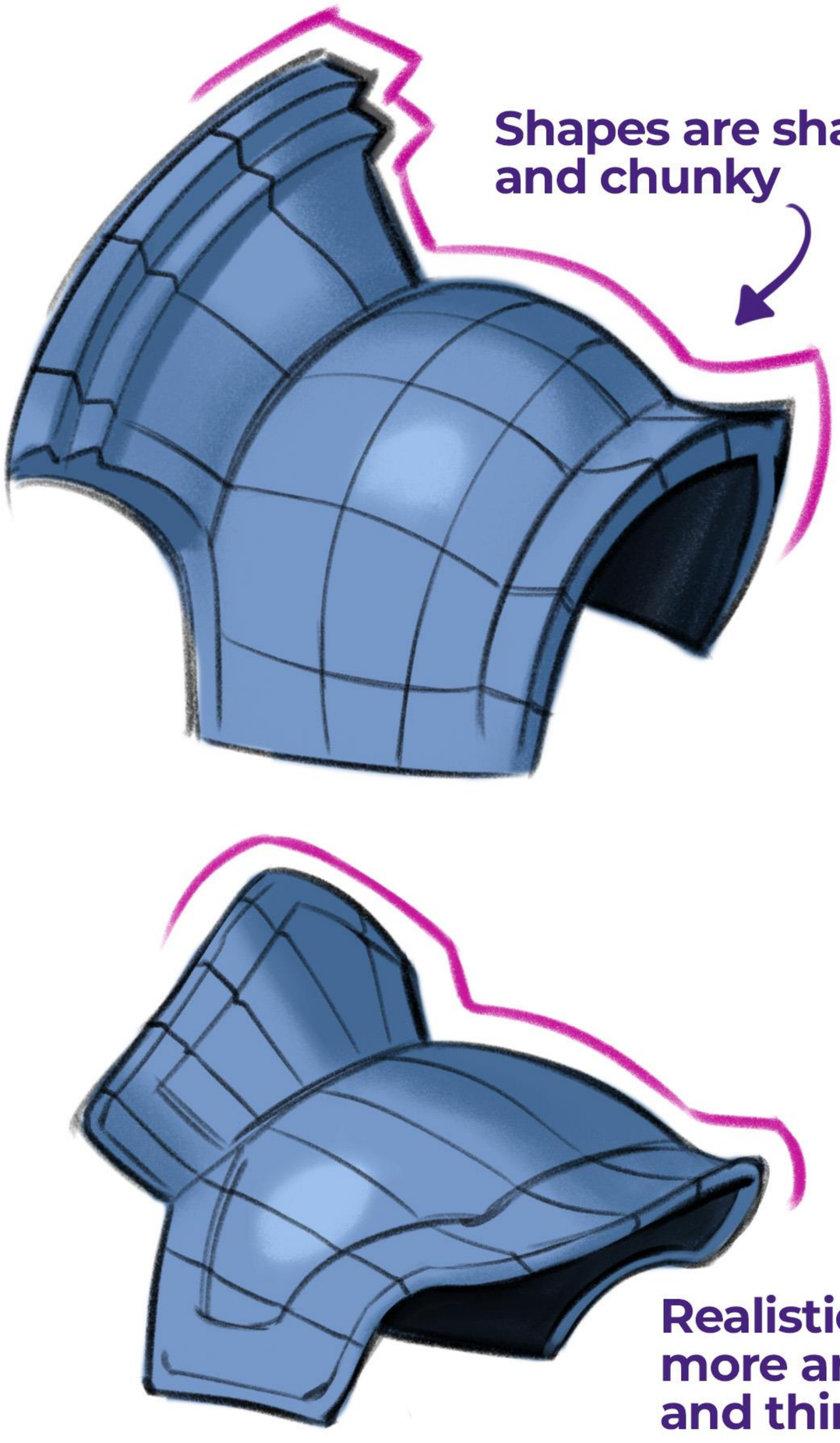
The armor plates of the manica follow a repeating pattern down the arm. Normally, they fit closely to the arm, but in this stylized variant, we're pushing the silhouette and increasing the thickness of the metal plates to make them more readable and chunky.



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Stylized Armor (4/4)

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We can experiment with the foundation of the manica to create different armor variants. ***Number 1*** has a more regal look with bronze trim and filigree, while ***number 2*** is more bare and functional— typical of a gladiator fighting in the trenches.

1.

2.

Repurposed Props

Tips on Design

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Repurposed Props (2/4)

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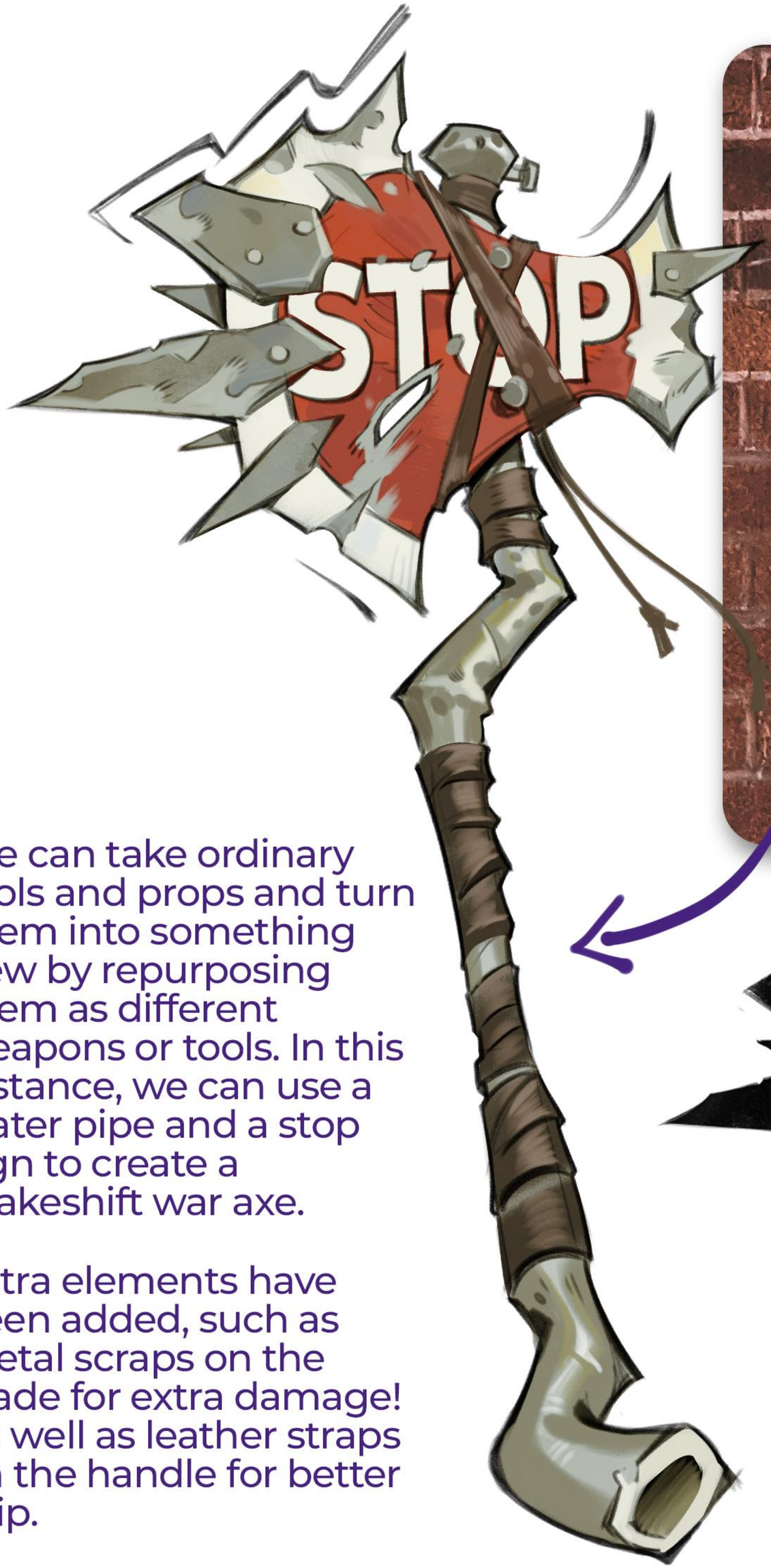

We can take ordinary tools and props and turn them into something new by repurposing them as different weapons or tools. In this instance, we can use a water pipe and a stop sign to create a makeshift war axe.

Extra elements have been added, such as metal scraps on the blade for extra damage! As well as leather straps on the handle for better grip.

Makeshift Axe

War Axe

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Repurposed Props (3/4)

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We can also alter the shape and structure of a tool to turn it into something new, like a chainsaw that functions as a saber.

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Repurposed Props (4/4)

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The overall shape of these props should read as ‘weapons,’ and clearly indicate their specific category, such as an axe or sawblade. While the components have been replaced with different materials, the core function remains the same.

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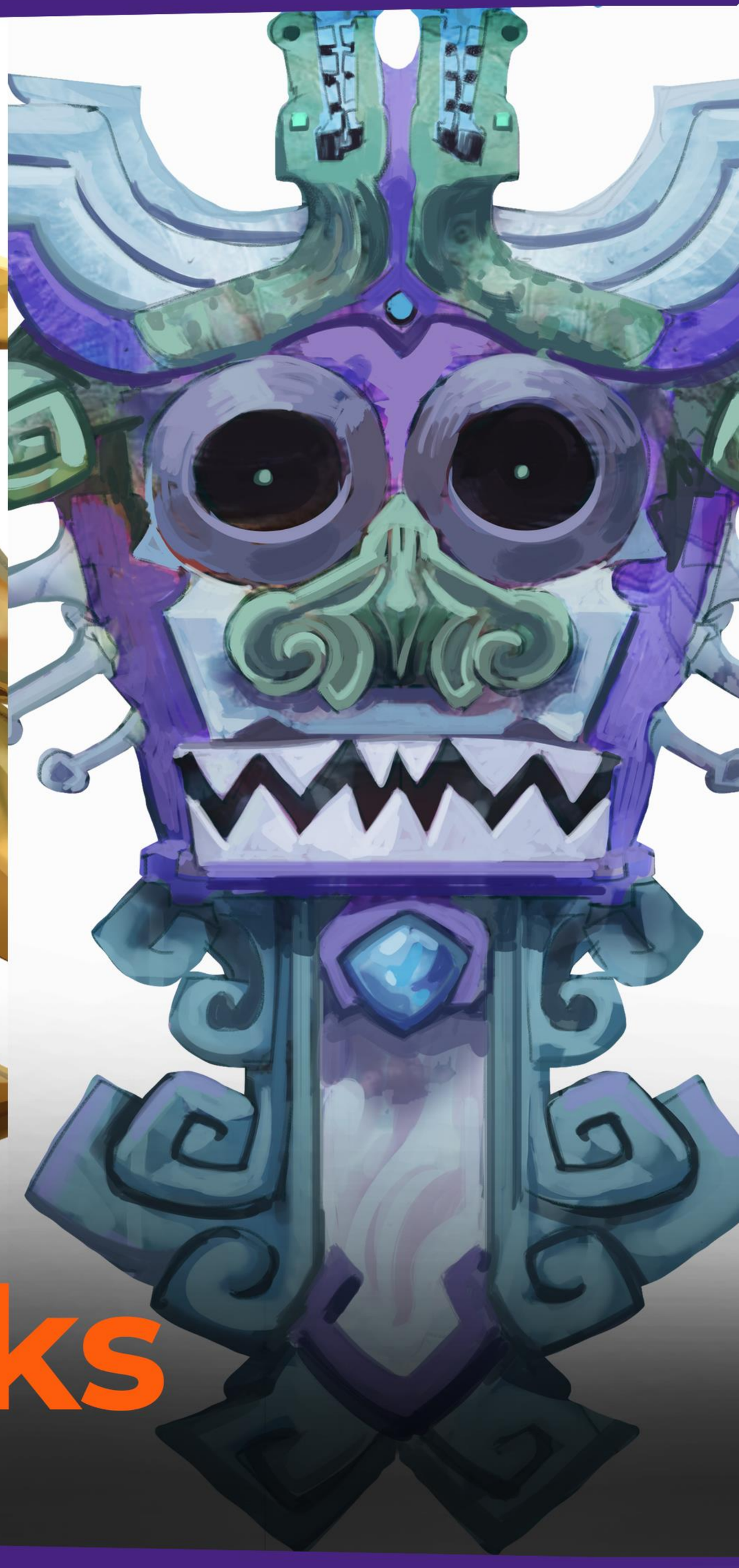


Tribal Masks

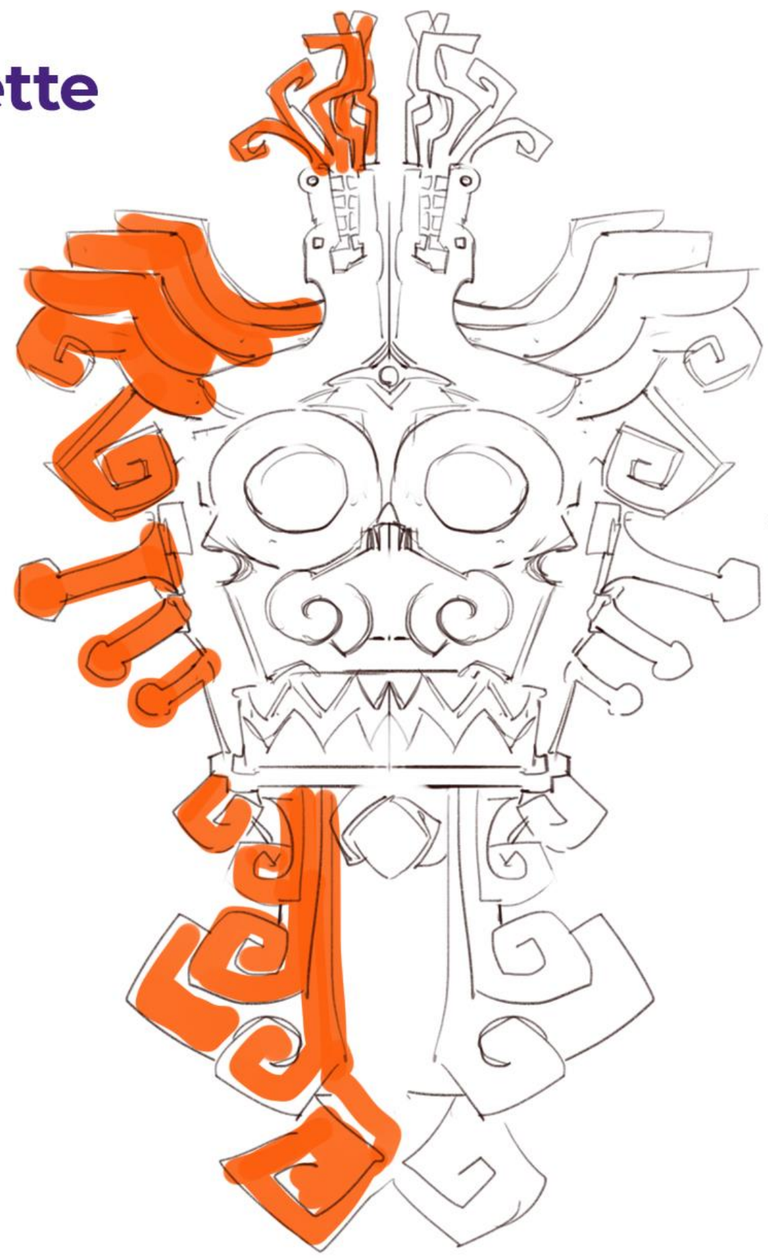
Tips on Symmetry

Drawing Symmetry

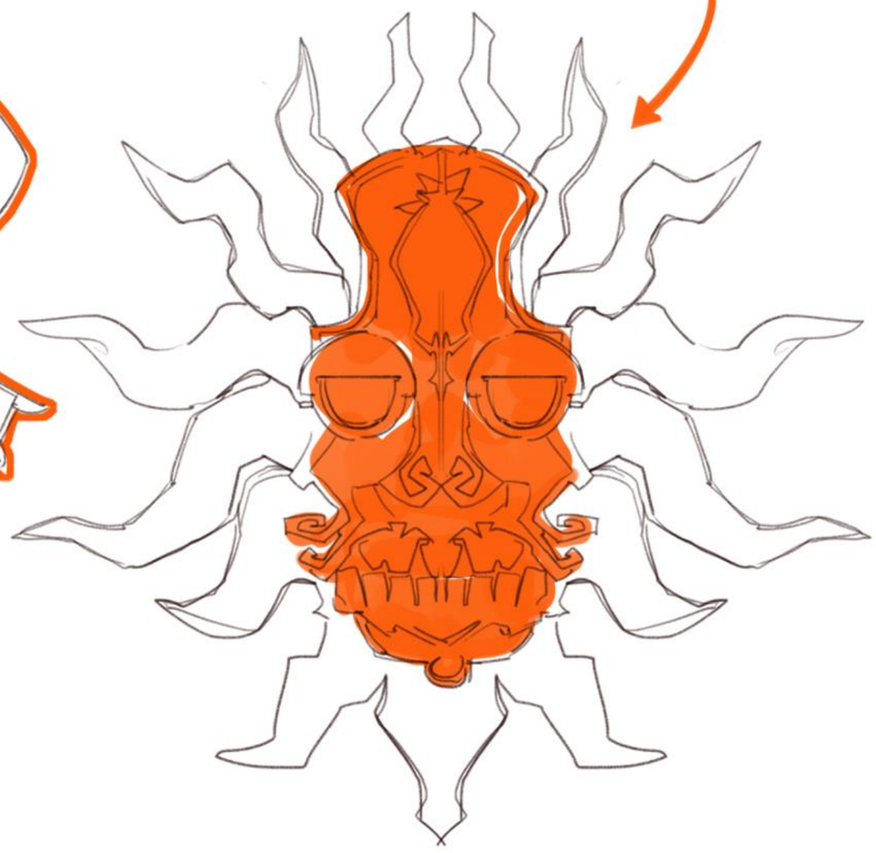
1. Outline

2. Creates Silhouette

3. Exterior Design



4. Interior Design



5. Details within

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Tribal Masks (3/4)

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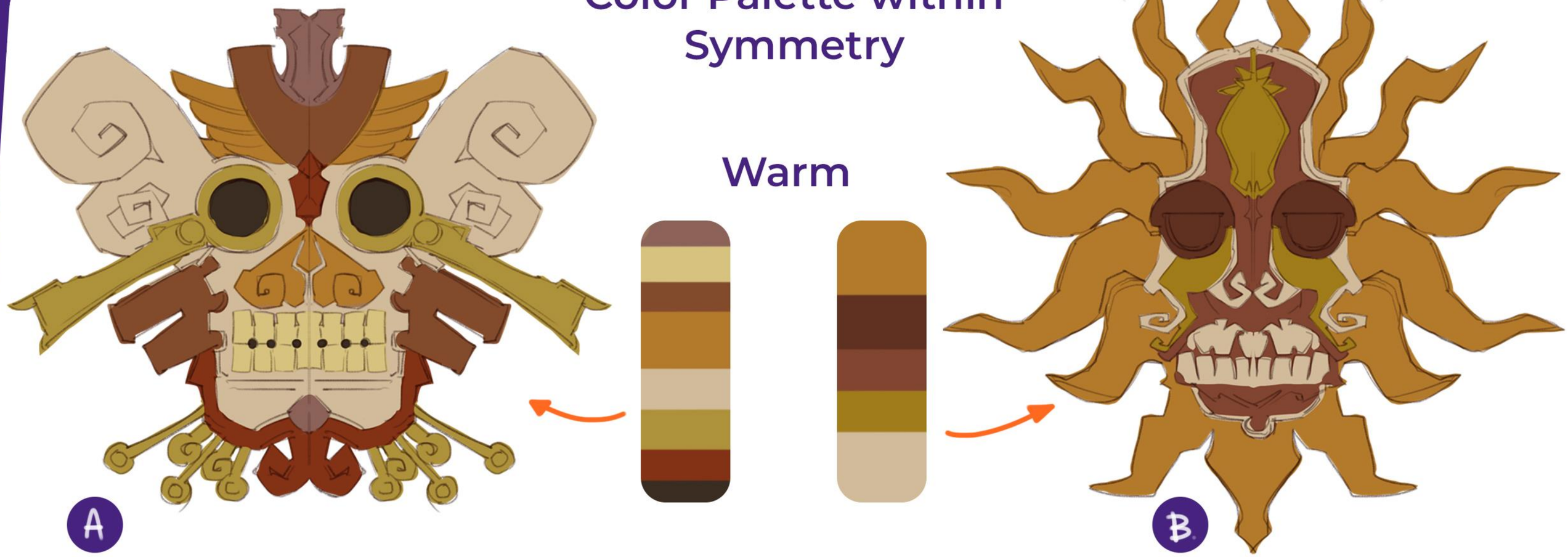
Color Palette within Symmetry

Warm



Cold

Contrast becomes key in Color Palettes

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Tribal Masks (4/4)

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Sketch Polish

In the last phase of the process, we start to do a bit of painting. We can take advantage of some texture - together with adding a bit of light. This way we get to a clear result by using only the principle of Symmetry.

Some tips on Symmetry

1. If you are using perfect symmetry, make sure it looks interesting.

2. Solve most of the problems in the drawing phase.

3. Color will make your piece more attractive - and if the base colors are right - adding light will make it shine!

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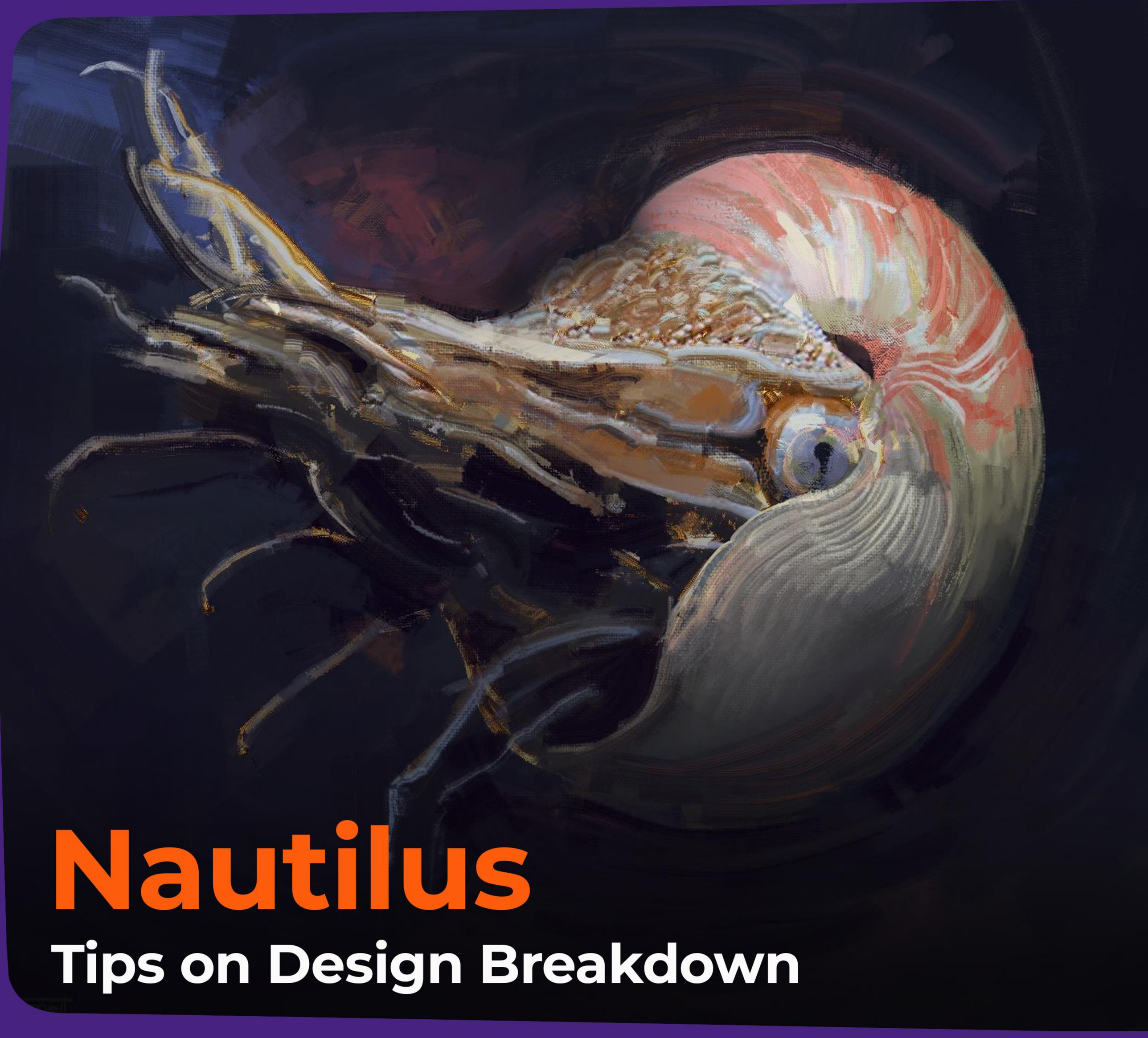

Nautilus

Tips on Design Breakdown

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Nautilus (2/4)

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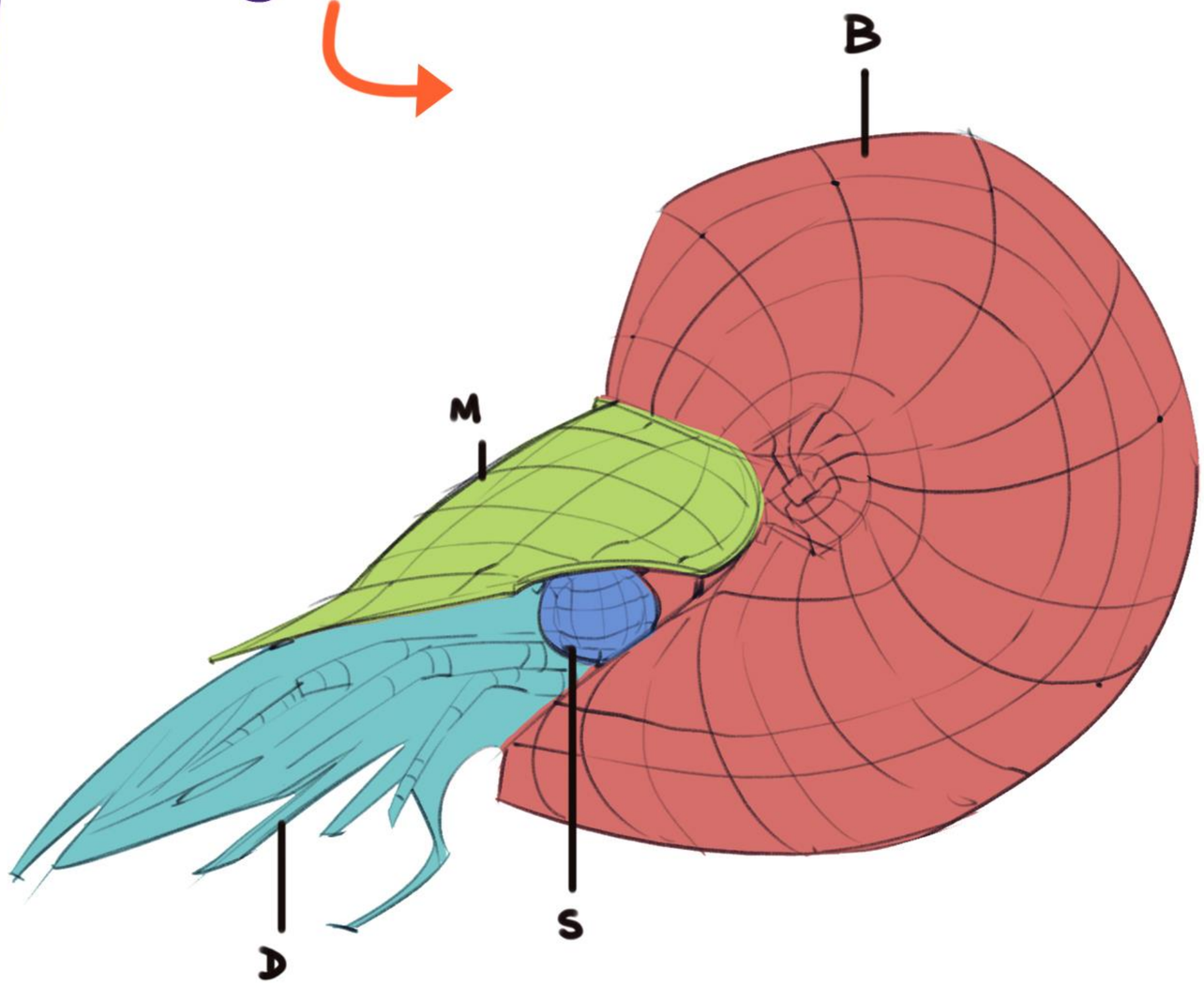
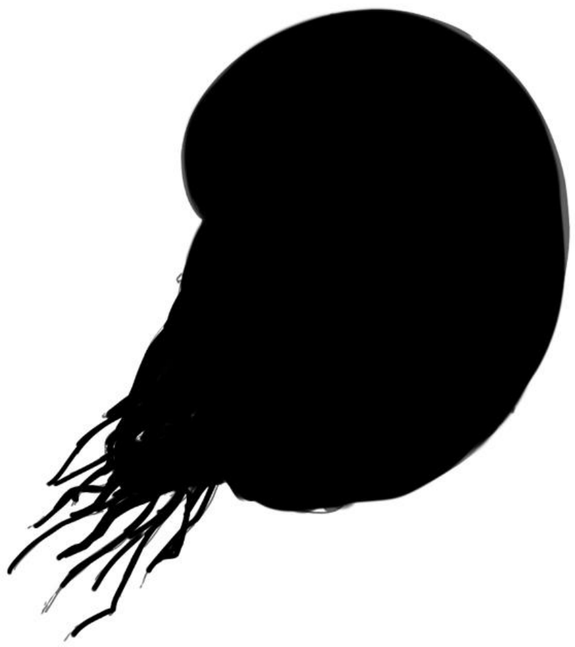
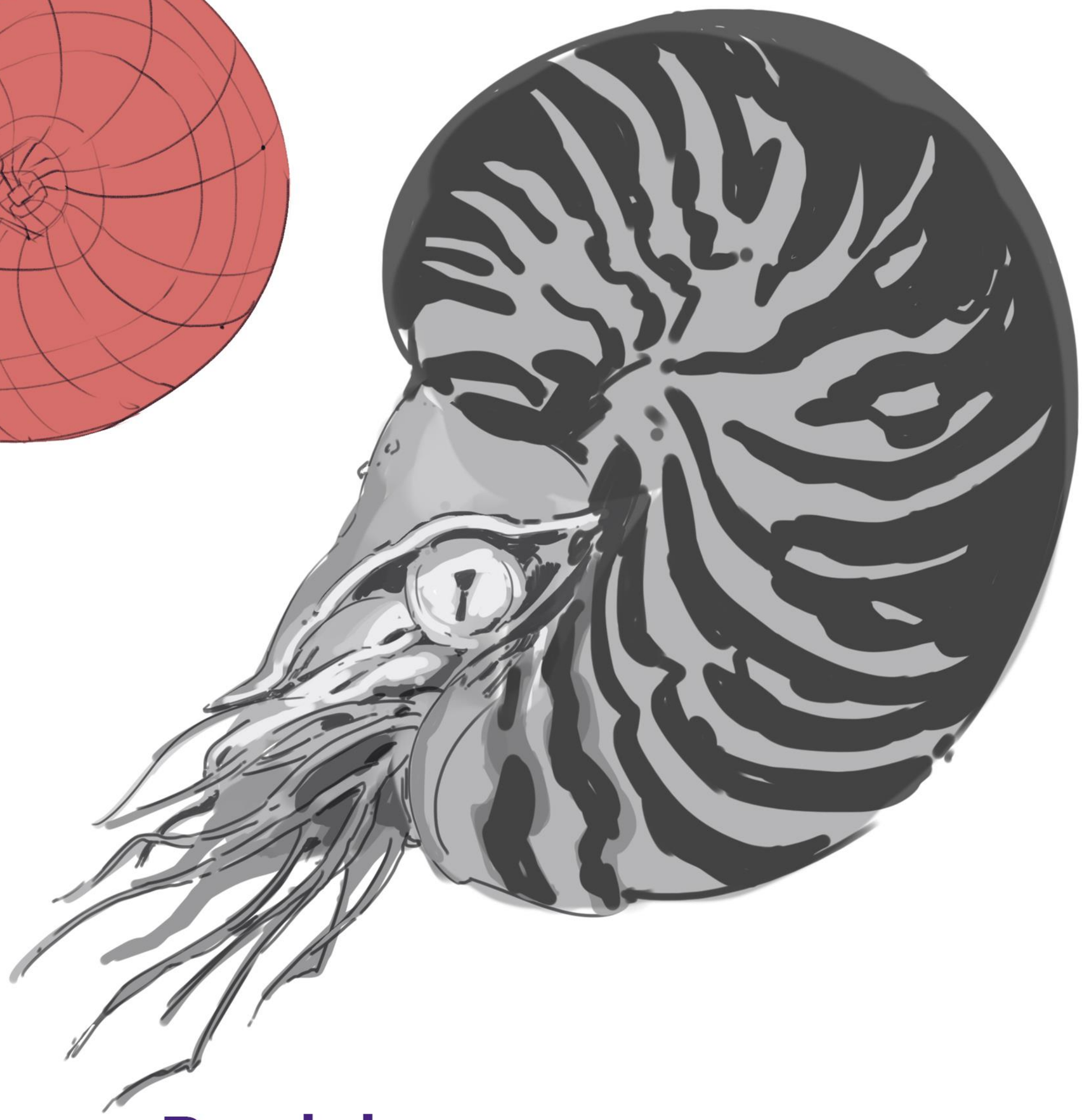
1. Big - Medium - Small Relationship



2. Silhouette



3. Drawing and Patterns



Breakdown

Let us go into color

On any breakdown - color becomes a main area to concern ourselves with. Interpretation of color and how we can keep true to it, will build the way we look at things.

Think about color

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Nautilus (4/4)

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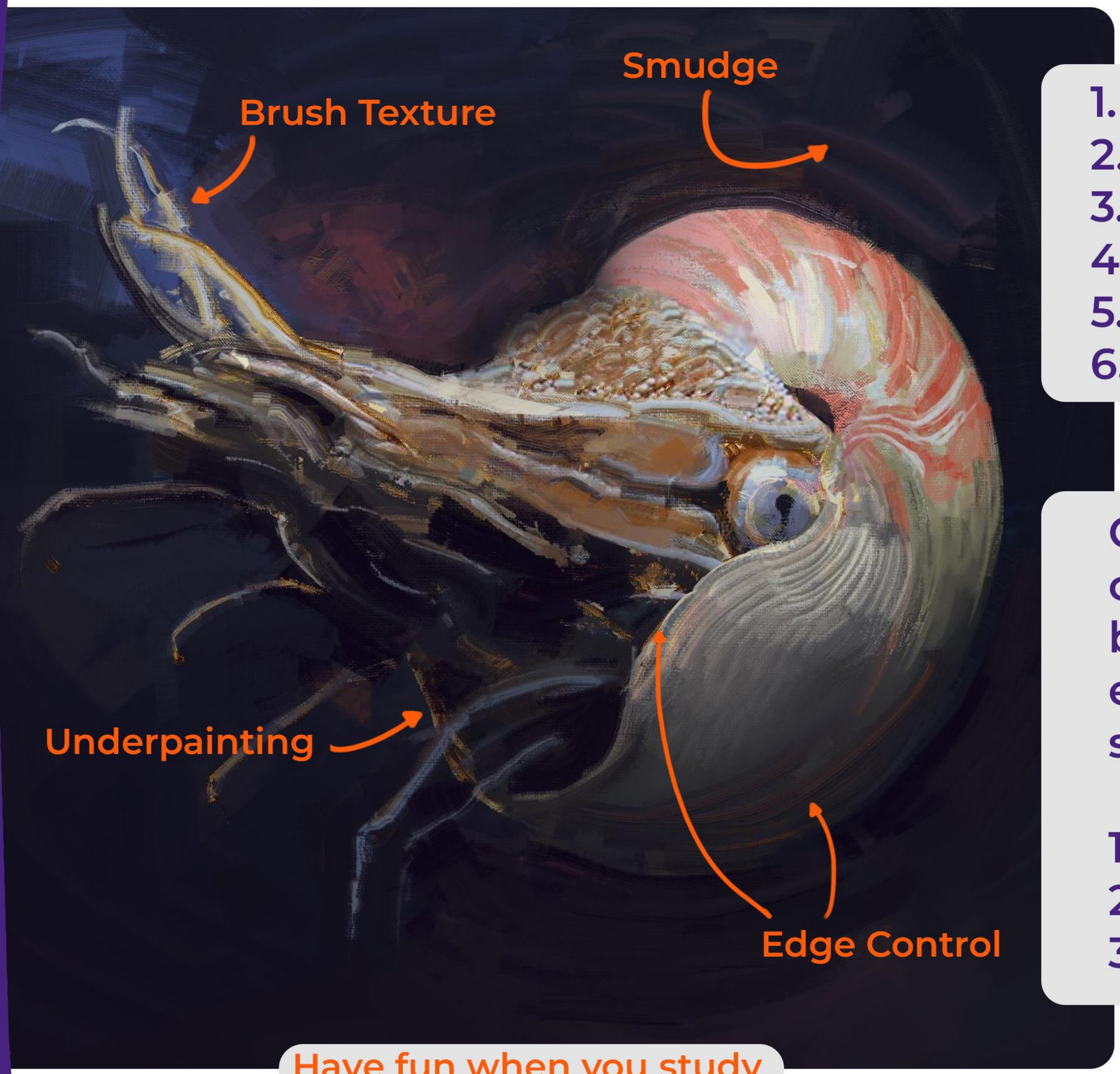
Painting Considerations

It’s best to stick to the main guns when it comes to painting - these areas are as follows:



1. Brush Type
2. Brush Texture
3. Brush Economy
4. Brush Size
5. Edge Control
6. Stroke Length

Other tips you can use for a better painting effect - are things such as:

1. Color Dynamics
2. Smudge Tool
3. Underpainting

Have fun when you study

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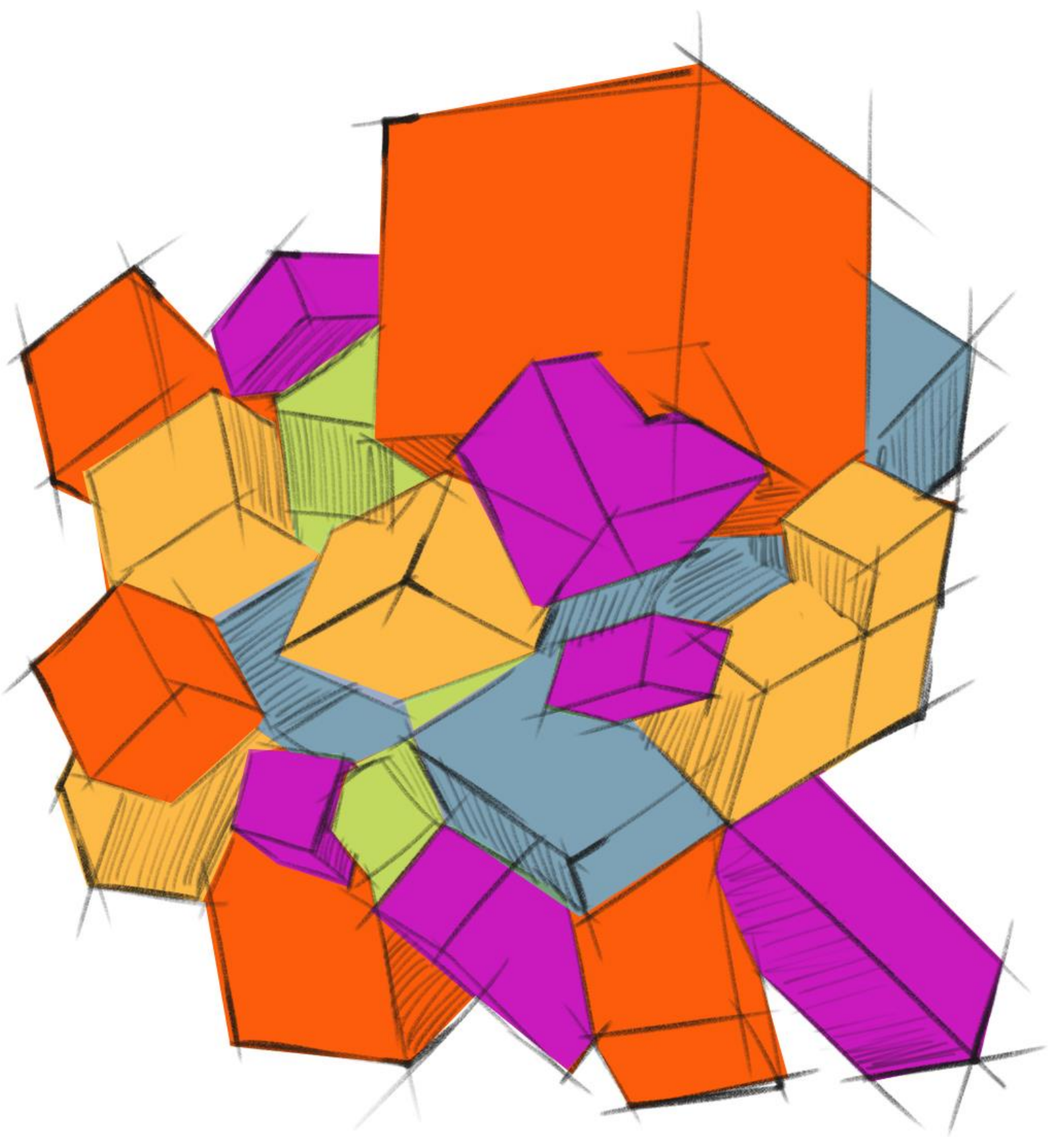
Crystal Clusters

Tips on Structure and Variation

Structure of Clusters



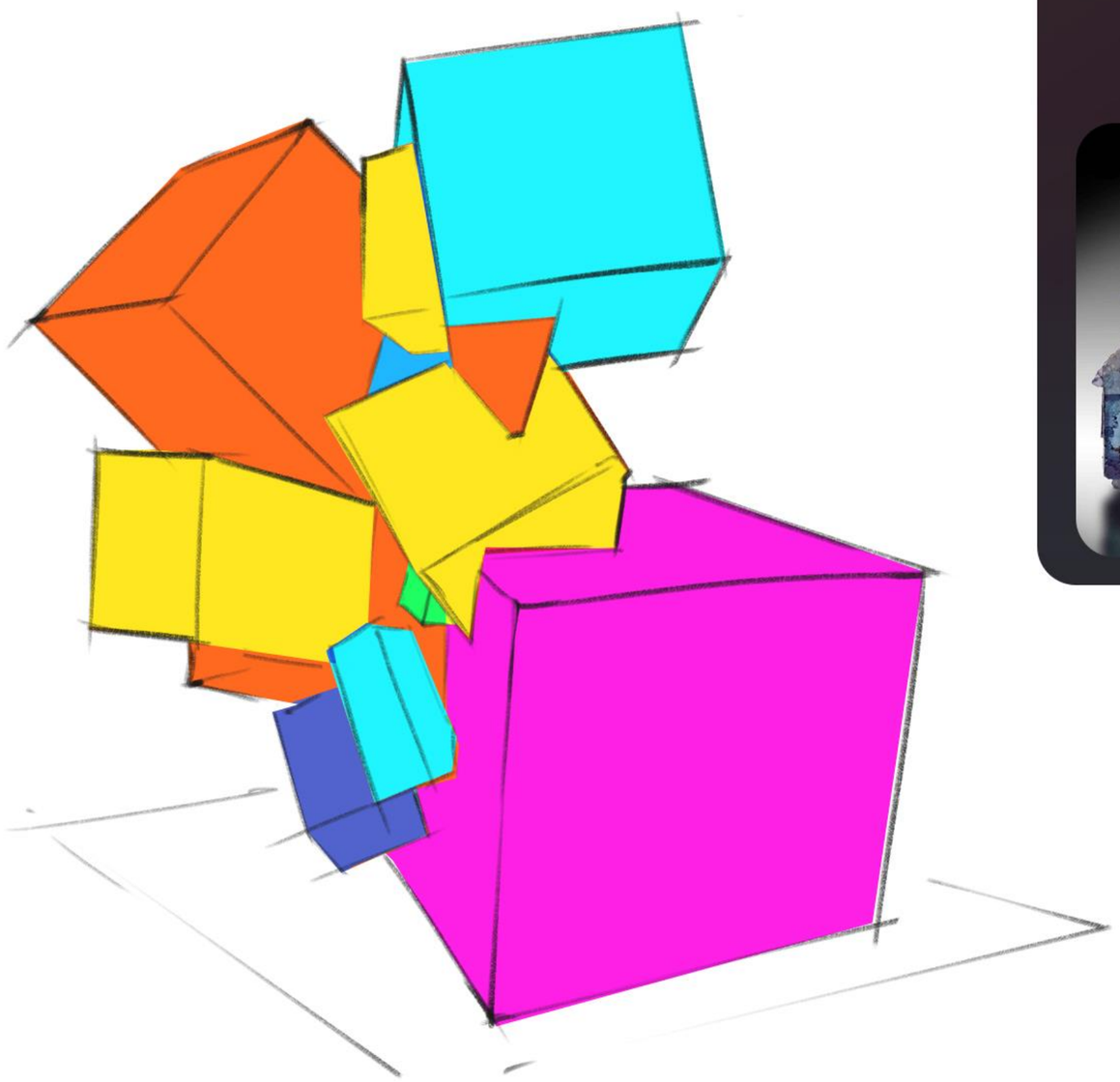
How many pieces are there?

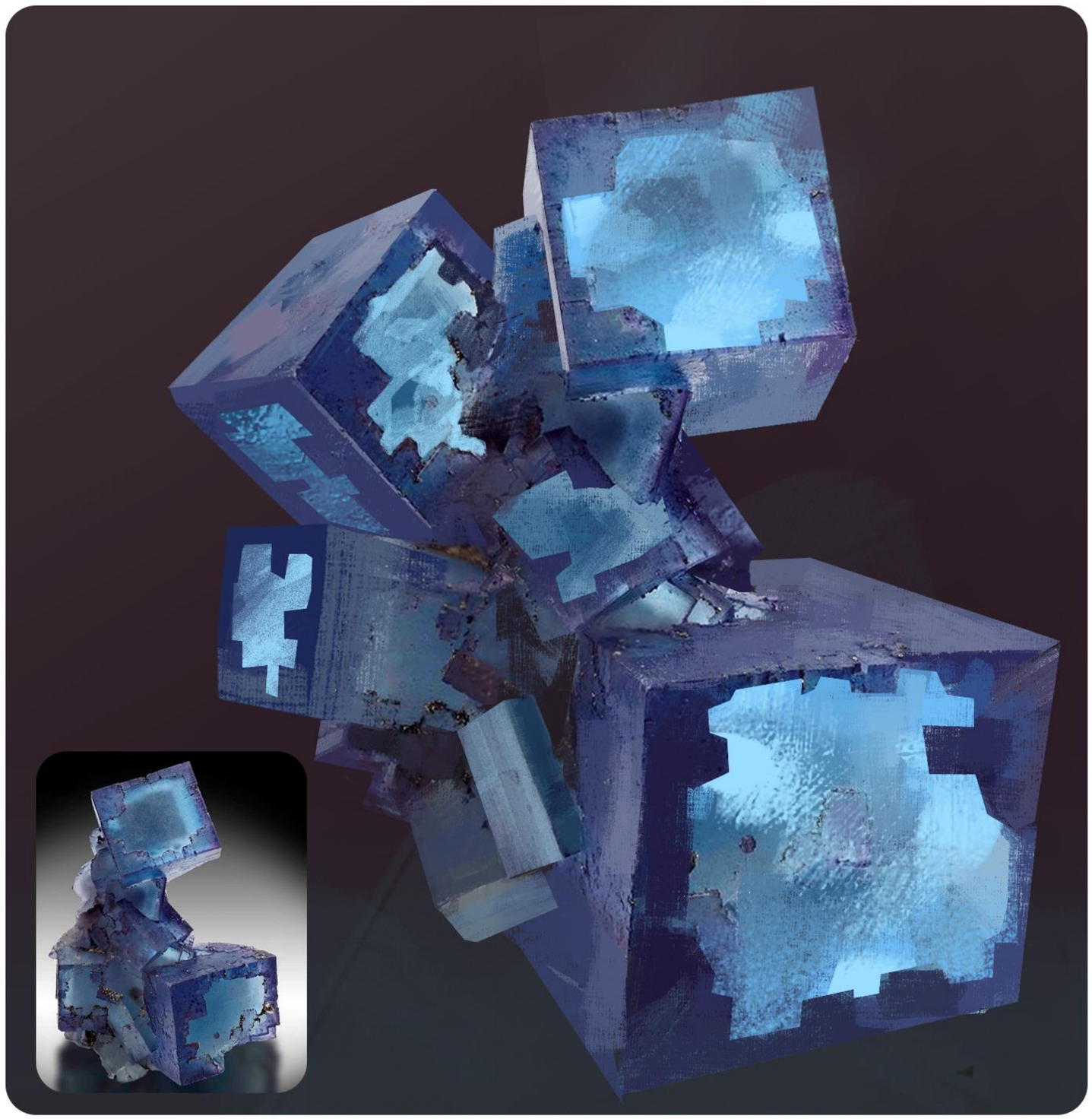
If you build clusters, you can use number sequences - such as 3-5-7-9-11 and so on. You can use a multiplier of 3 as well and you would still have interesting results.

Variety in scale - height and width

Different structures

We can find clusters in crystals, and they can have multiple builds: they can use cubes - so you get cubical structures, they can have cylindrical structures and so on.





Now what we did - we used the reference, but did not replicate it 1-to-1. We used it for material purposes in this case, and built our own.

Materials are also essential - for that we use Reference

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Crystal Clusters (4/4)

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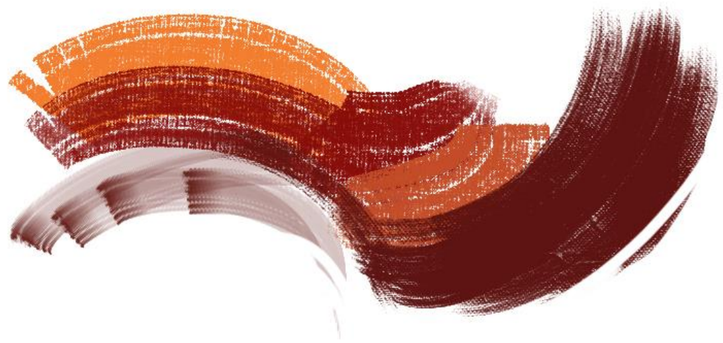
Process

If you consider a good process - it's good to do the following:

1. Structure and drawing
2. Underpainting - use orange/red colors

3. Use painting principles: Edge control - Texture - Brush economy etc.



Couple of tips when you build clusters!

1. Use a sequence of numbers: 3 - 5 - 7 - 9 - 11 ... etc.
2. Use simple structures: cubical - cylindrical - spherical etc.
3. Build a clear color palette - and practice.

HAVE FUN with Clusters!

Designing Fumes

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Designing Fumes (2/4)

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When painting **smoke** or **gasses**, we can turn them into visually interesting features.
Instead of amorphous shapes or vague textures, the physical properties of vapor can be enhanced and exaggerated.
A strong flow and rhythm can be interesting on its own, or serve as shapes to guide the viewer's eye.

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Designing Fumes (3/4)

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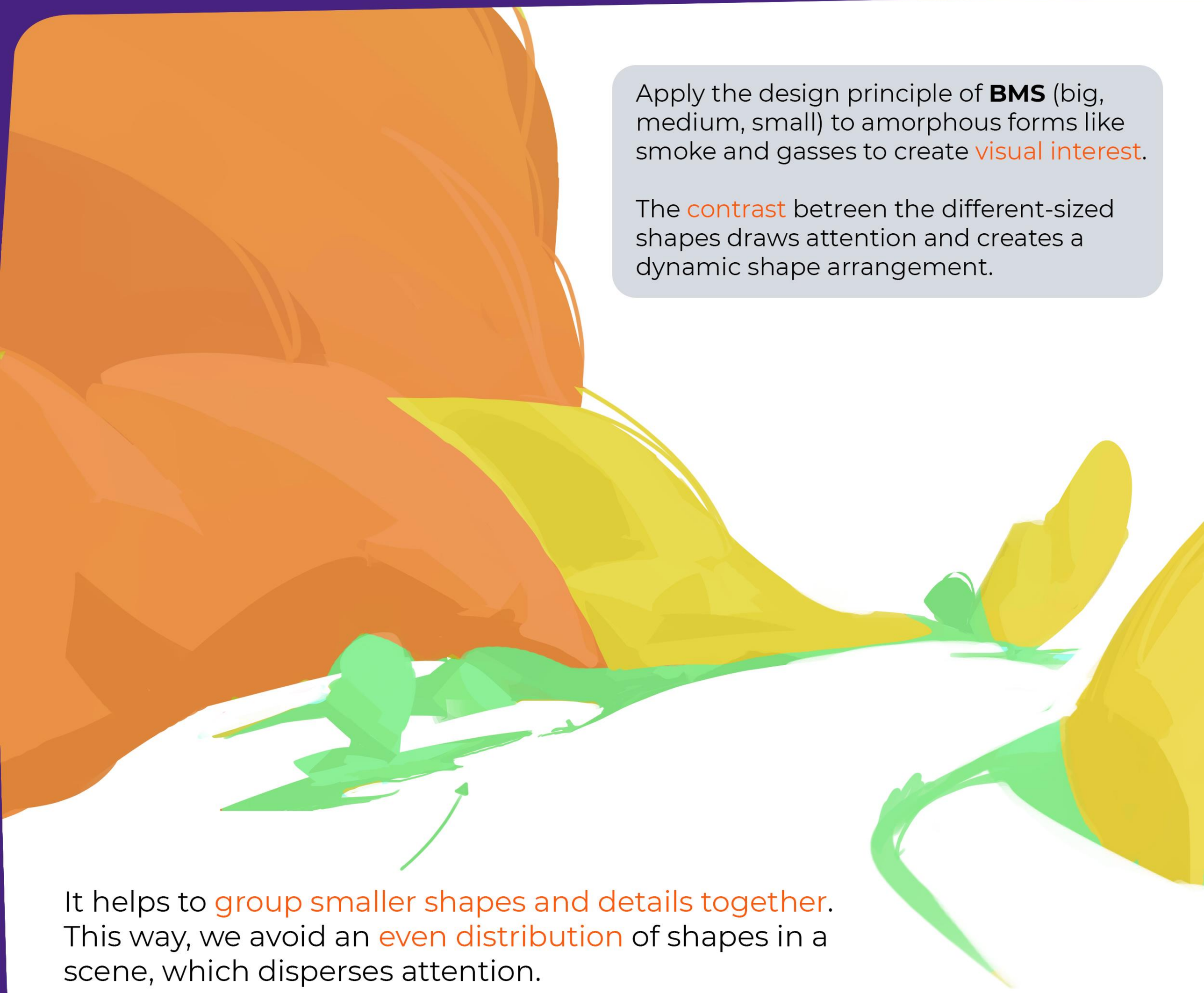
Apply the design principle of **BMS** (big, medium, small) to amorphous forms like smoke and gasses to create visual interest.

The contrast betreen the different-sized shapes draws attention and creates a dynamic shape arrangement.



It helps to group smaller shapes and details together. This way, we avoid an even distribution of shapes in a scene, which disperses attention.

Visign Cheat Sheets : Design

Designing Fumes (4/4)

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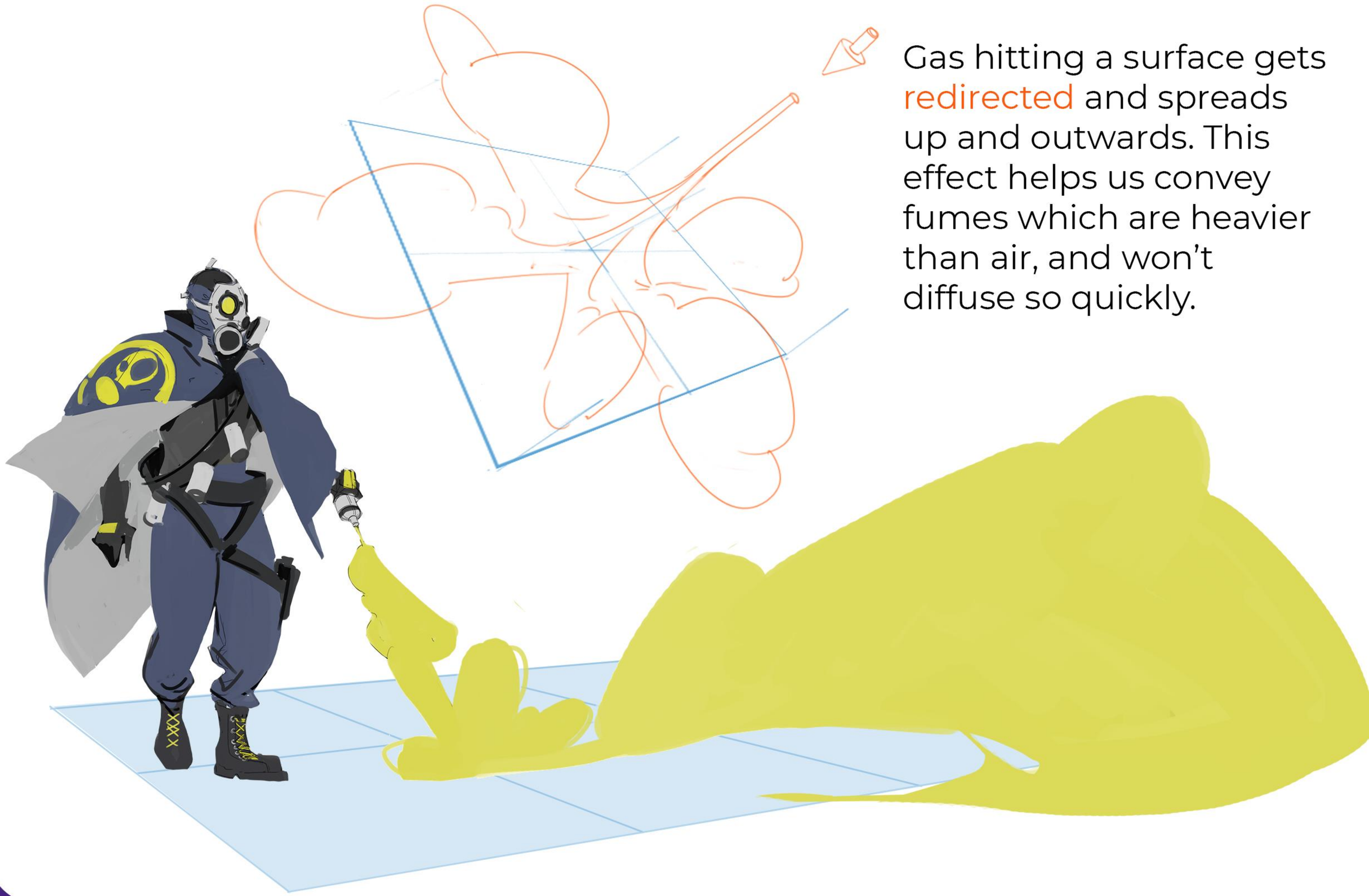
Fumes colliding with solid objects can be a great opportunity to add motion to a scene. In addition, the impact connects different elements in a scene and makes it appear more coherent and believable.



Gas hitting a surface gets redirected and spreads up and outwards. This effect helps us convey fumes which are heavier than air, and won't diffuse so quickly.

Visign Cheat Sheets : Design

Armstrong: Structure to Design (1/4)

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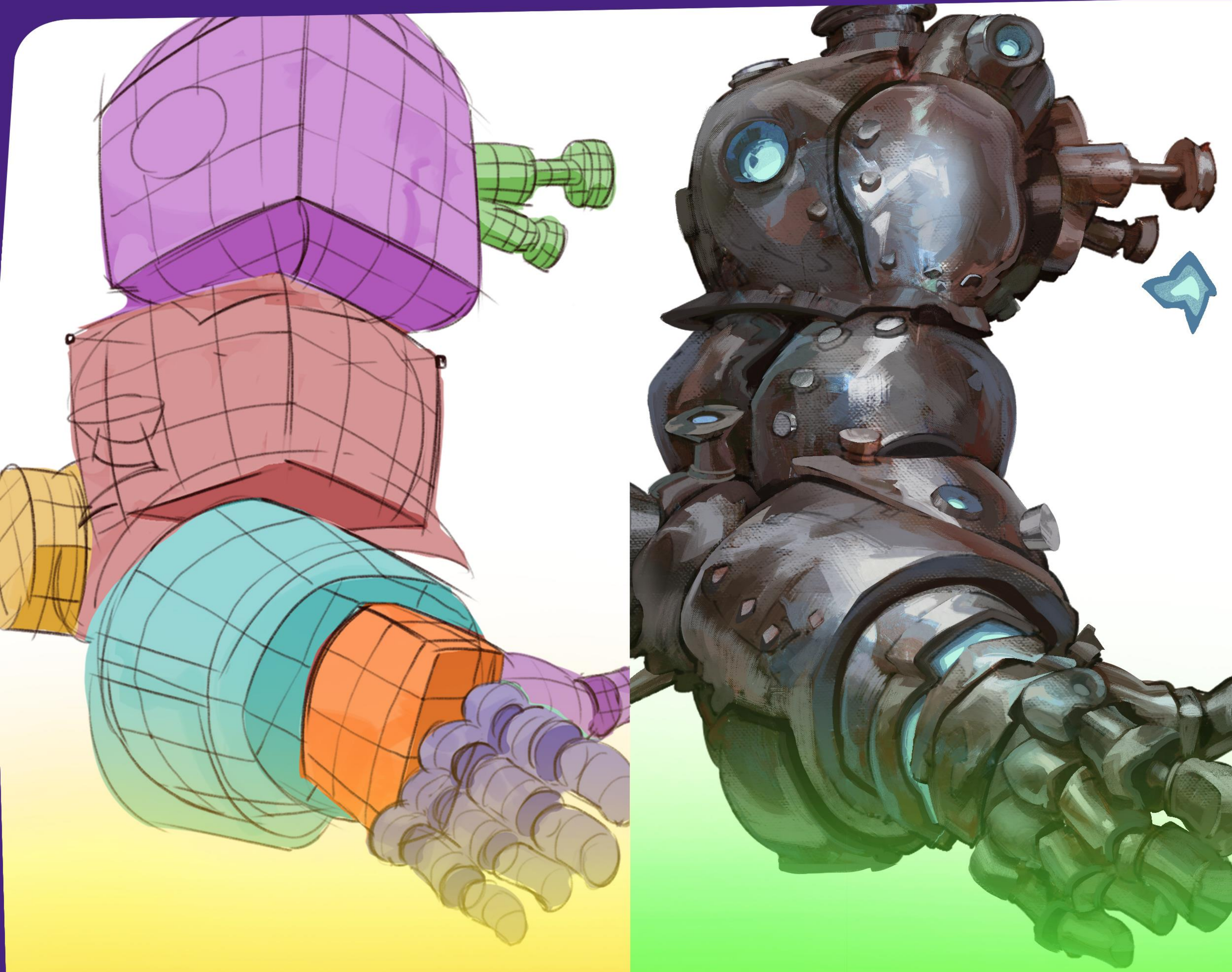
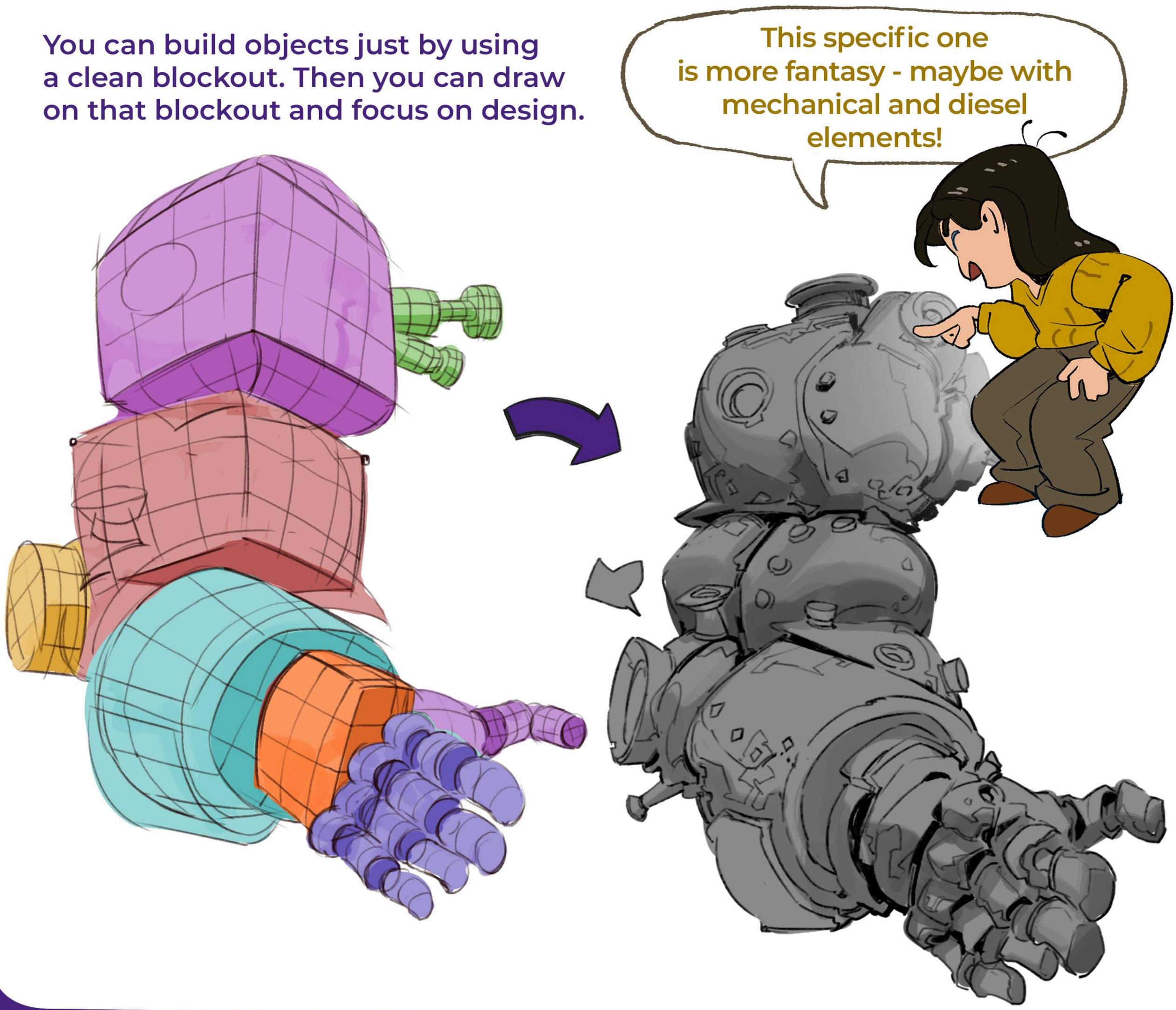


From Structure to Final Render

You can build objects just by using a clean blockout. Then you can draw on that blockout and focus on design.



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Armstrong: Structure to Design (3/4)

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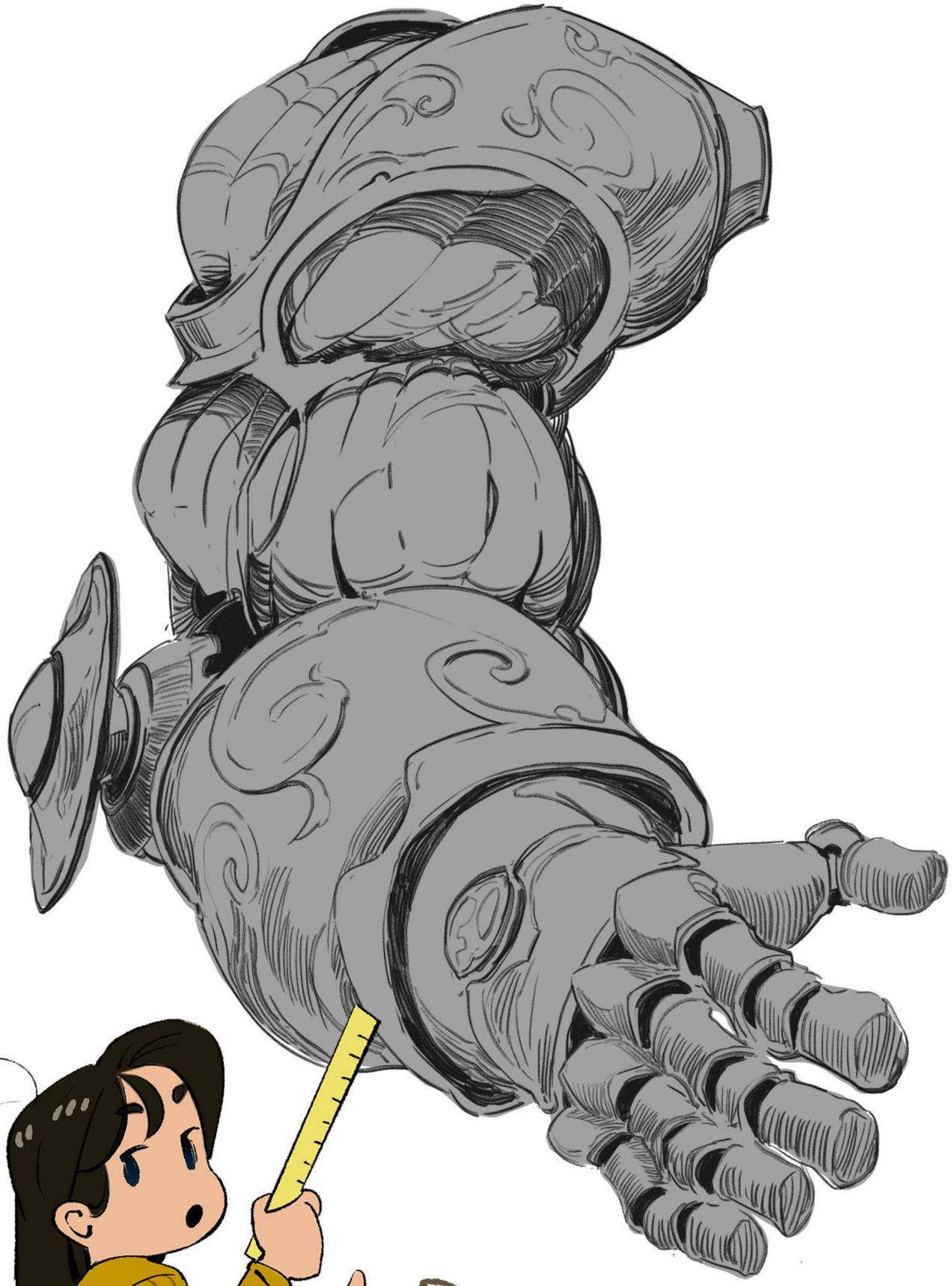
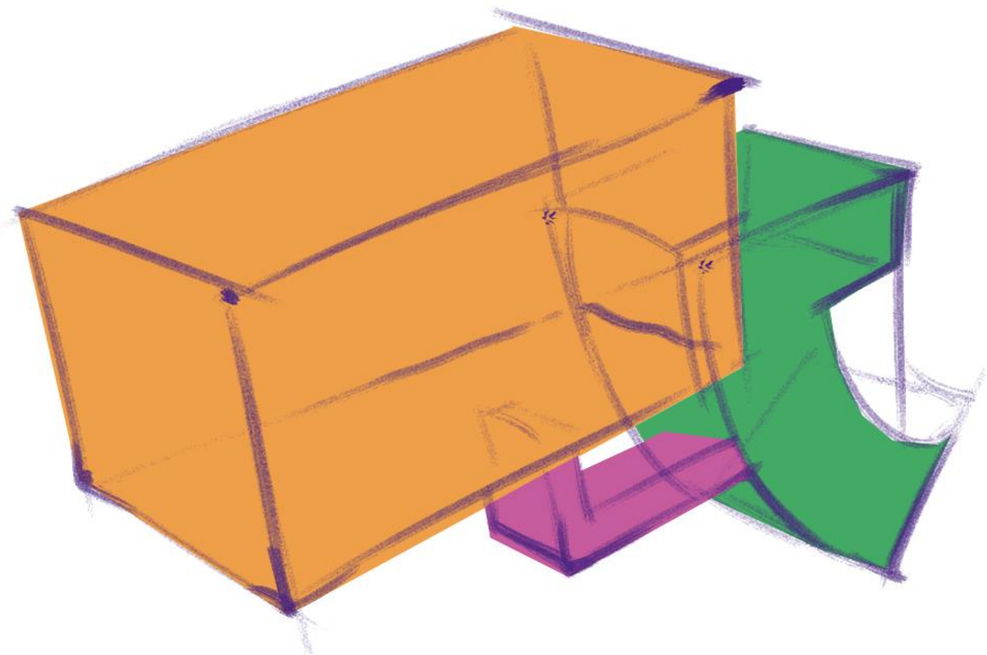
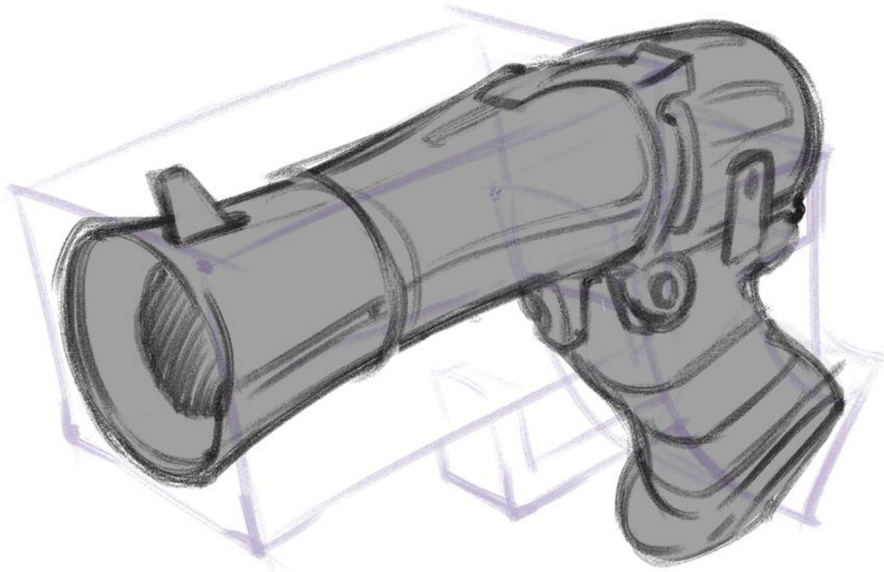
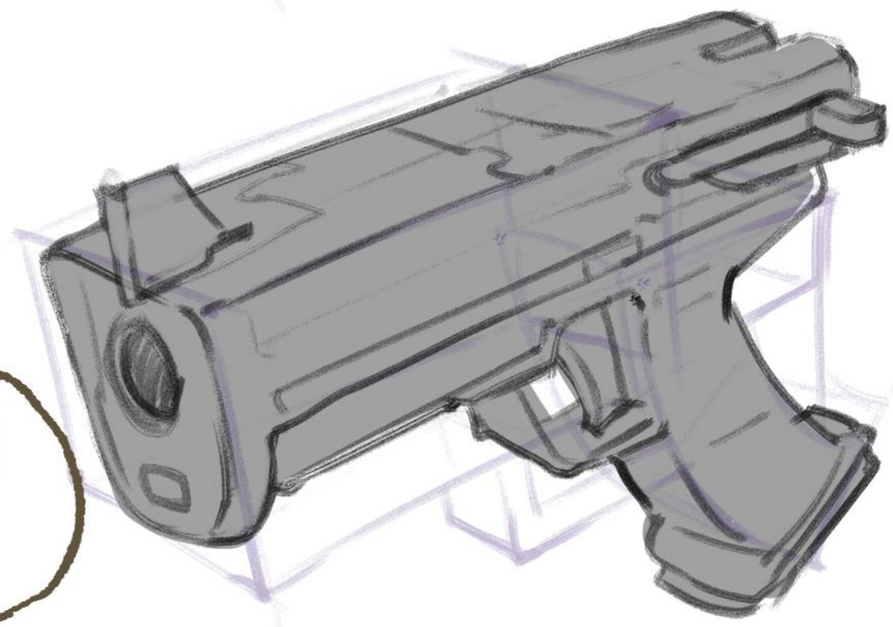


Practice with simple things



If it becomes too simple, add more complexity





This other one leans more towards modern fantasy! Design elements change, overall design changes.

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Armstrong: Structure to Design (4/4)

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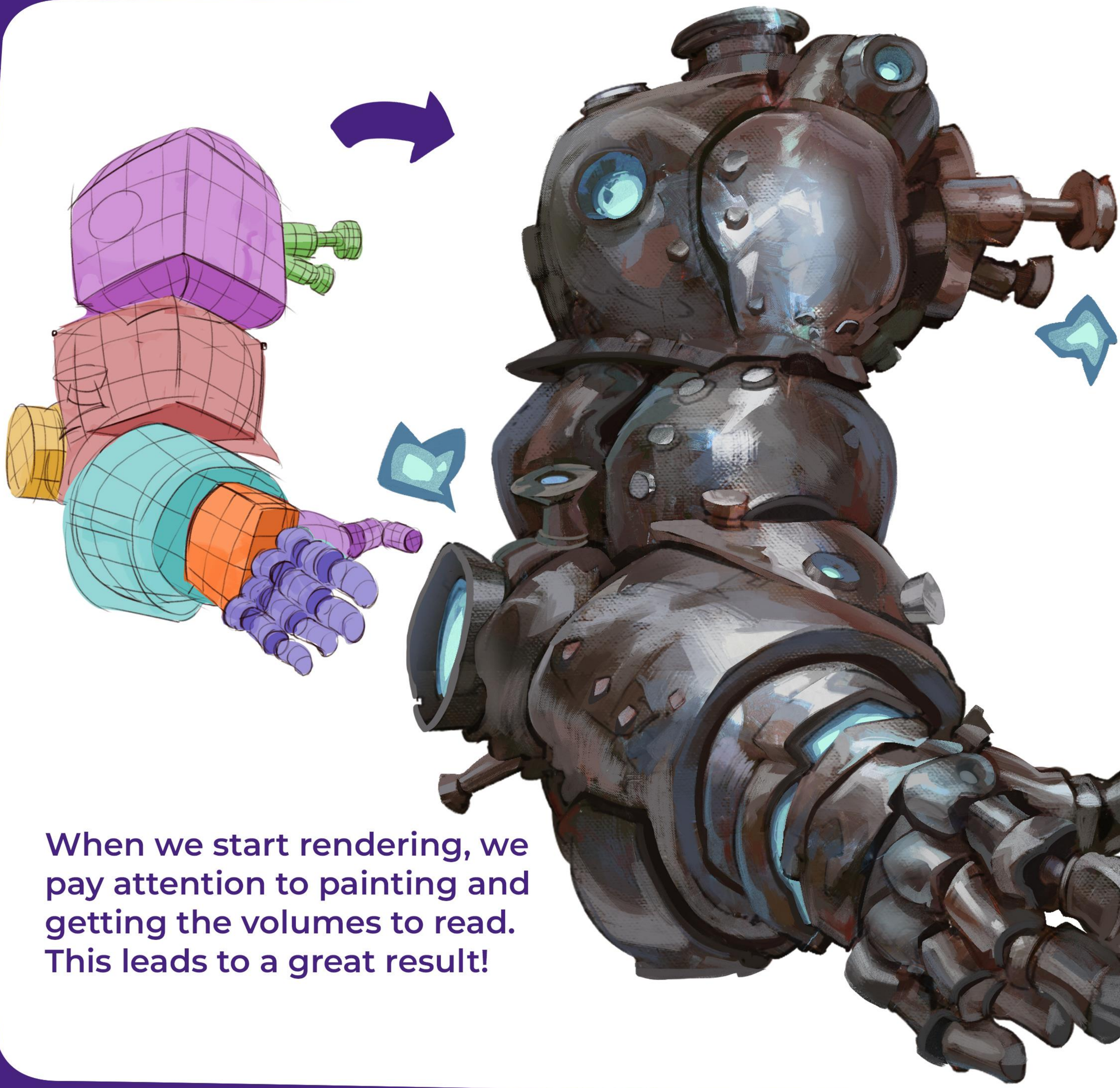

When we start rendering, we pay attention to painting and getting the volumes to read. This leads to a great result!

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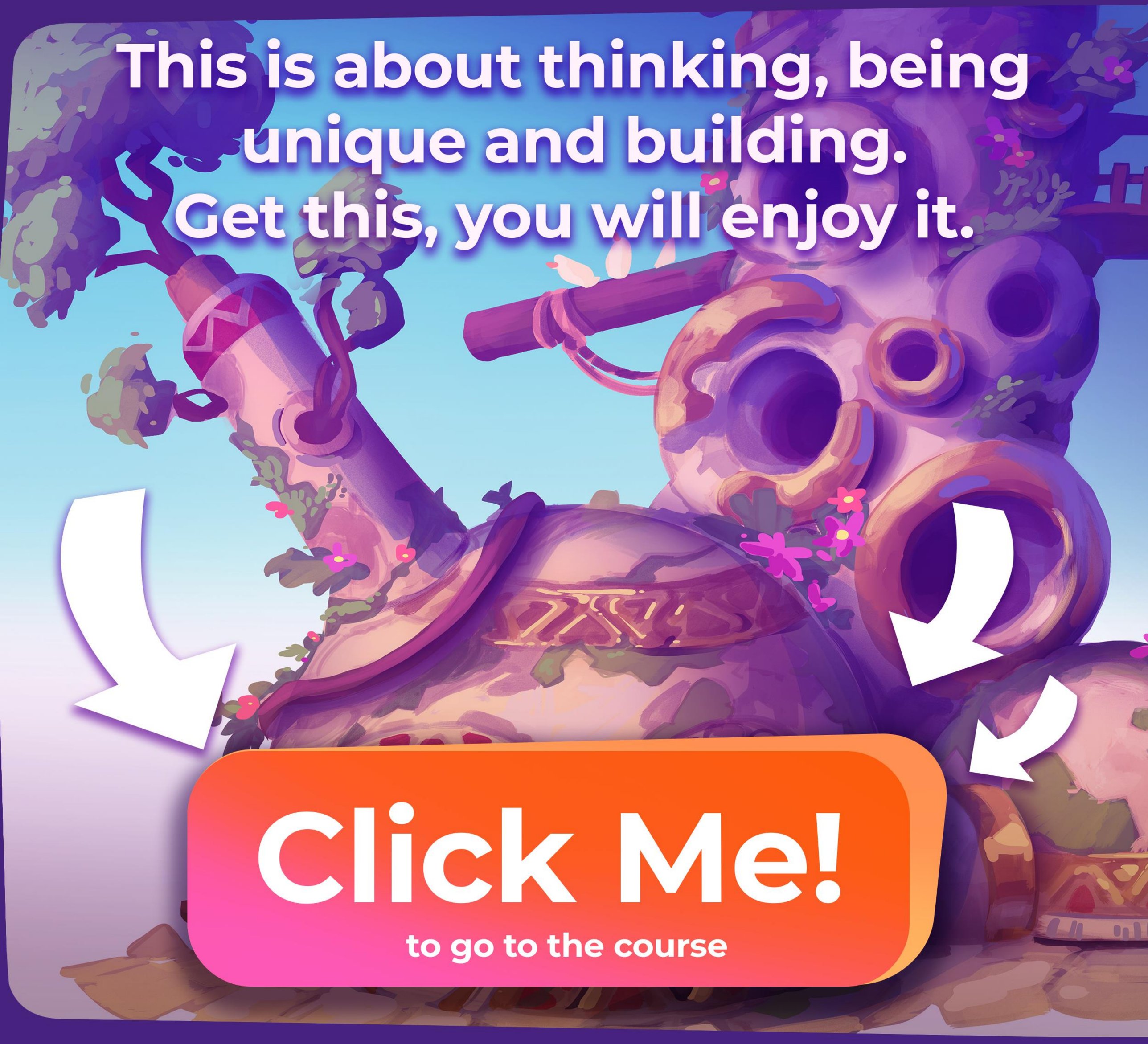

This is about thinking, being unique and building. Get this, you will enjoy it.

Click Me!

to go to the course

Visign Cheat Sheets : Design

Robot Joints (1/4)

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Robotic Joint Essentials!

Visign Cheat Sheets : Design

Robot Joints (2/4)

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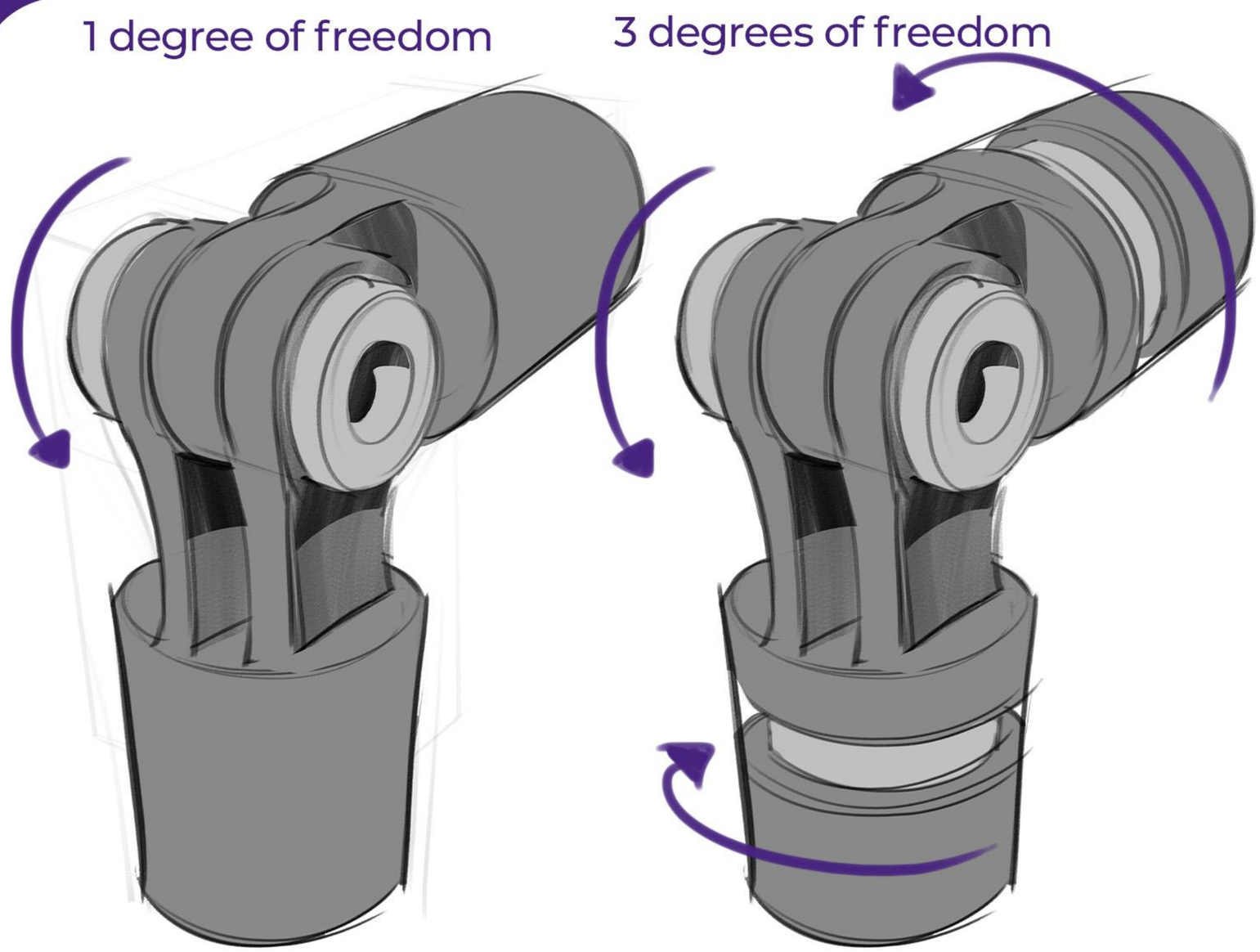
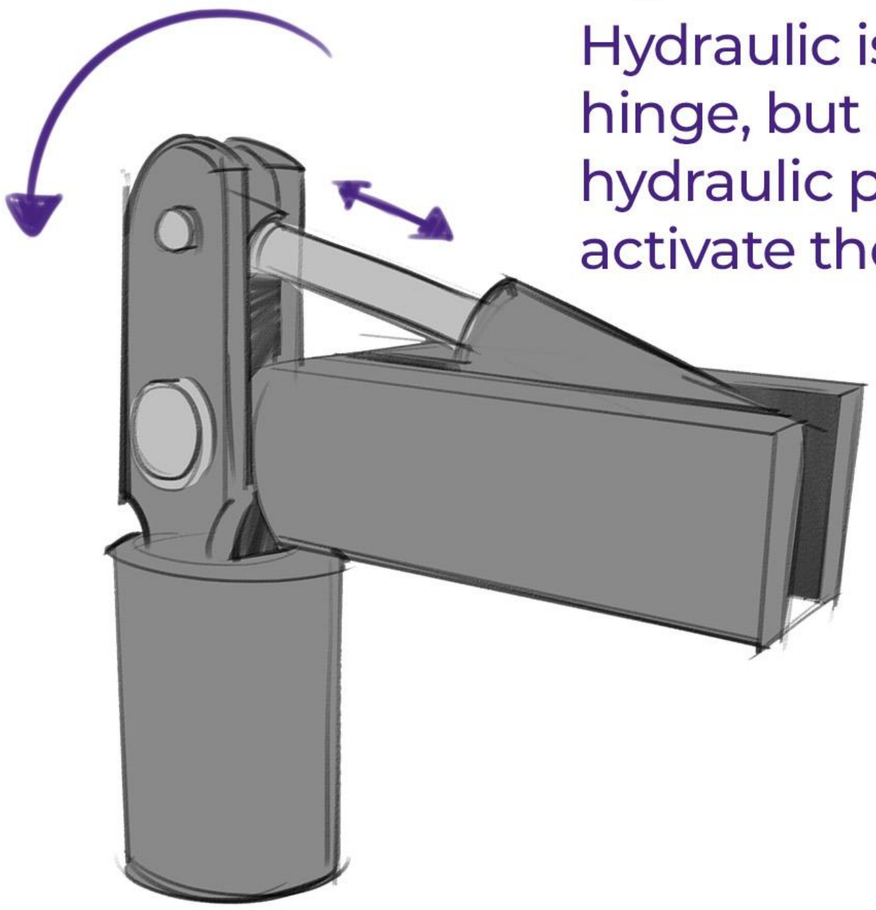


Hinge Joints

Hinge joints are very common in robotics, providing one degree of freedom. They are often used in the elbows and knees.
Since ball-and-socket joints aren't used, a hinge joint is typically paired with a rotating joint, which allows the robot's limb to twist.

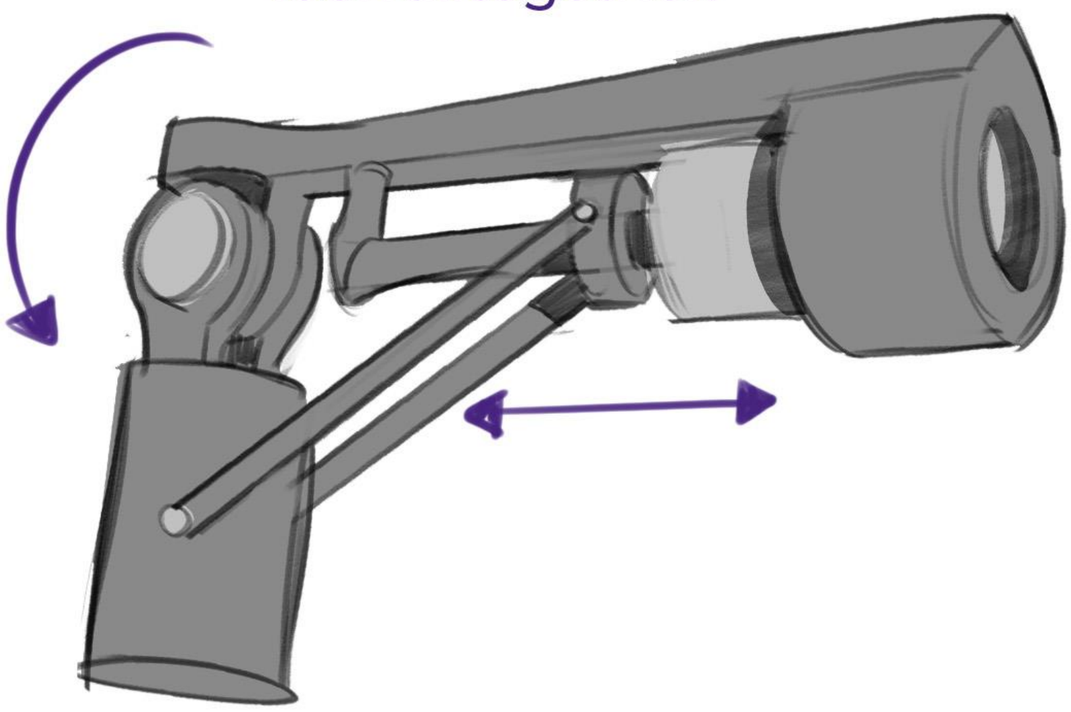
Hydraulic

Hydraulic is similar to a hinge, but uses a hydraulic pump to activate the movement.



Slide Joint

Slide joint is also similar to a hinge, but gives is a different look alltogether.



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Robot Joints (3/4)

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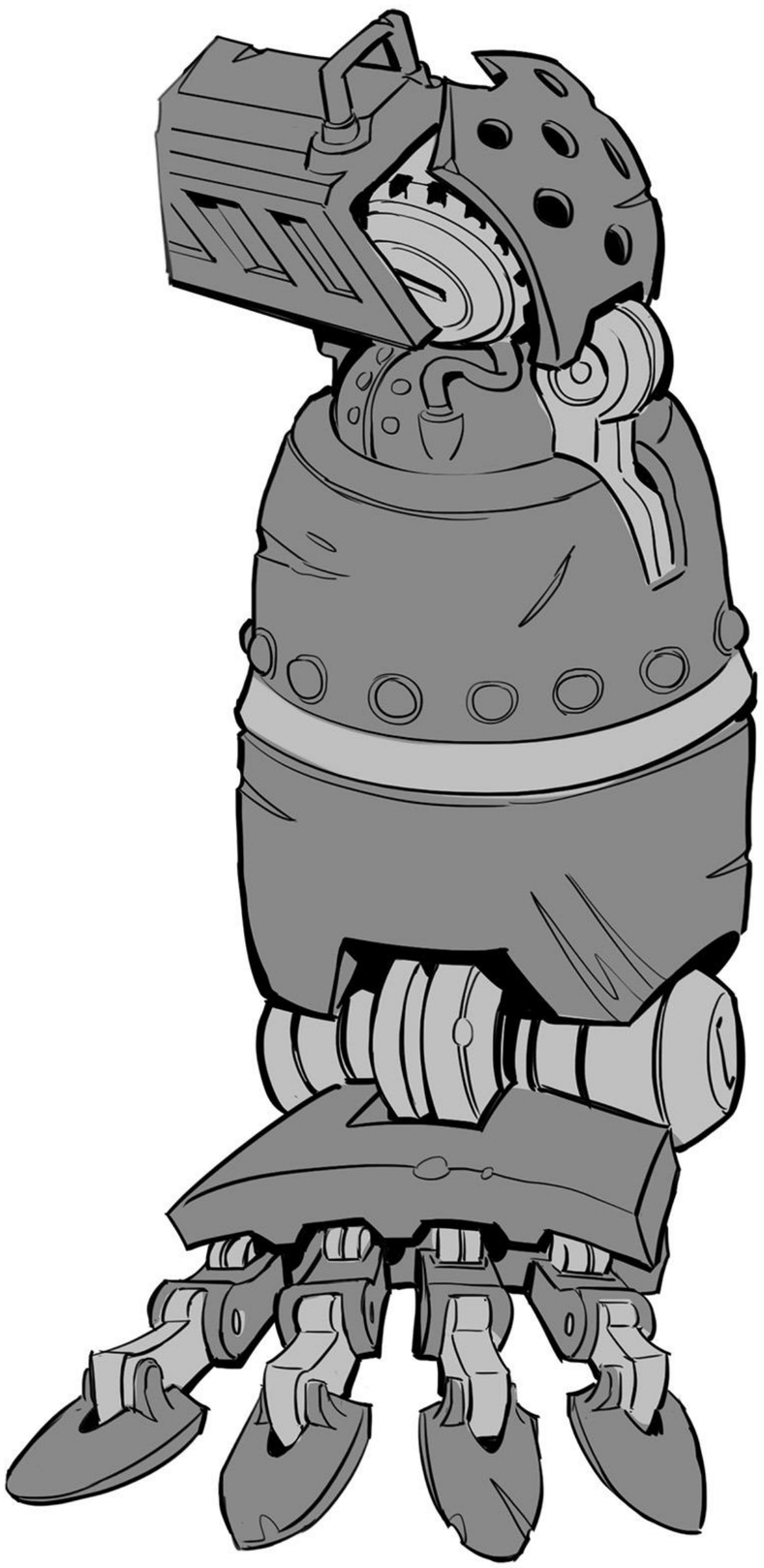
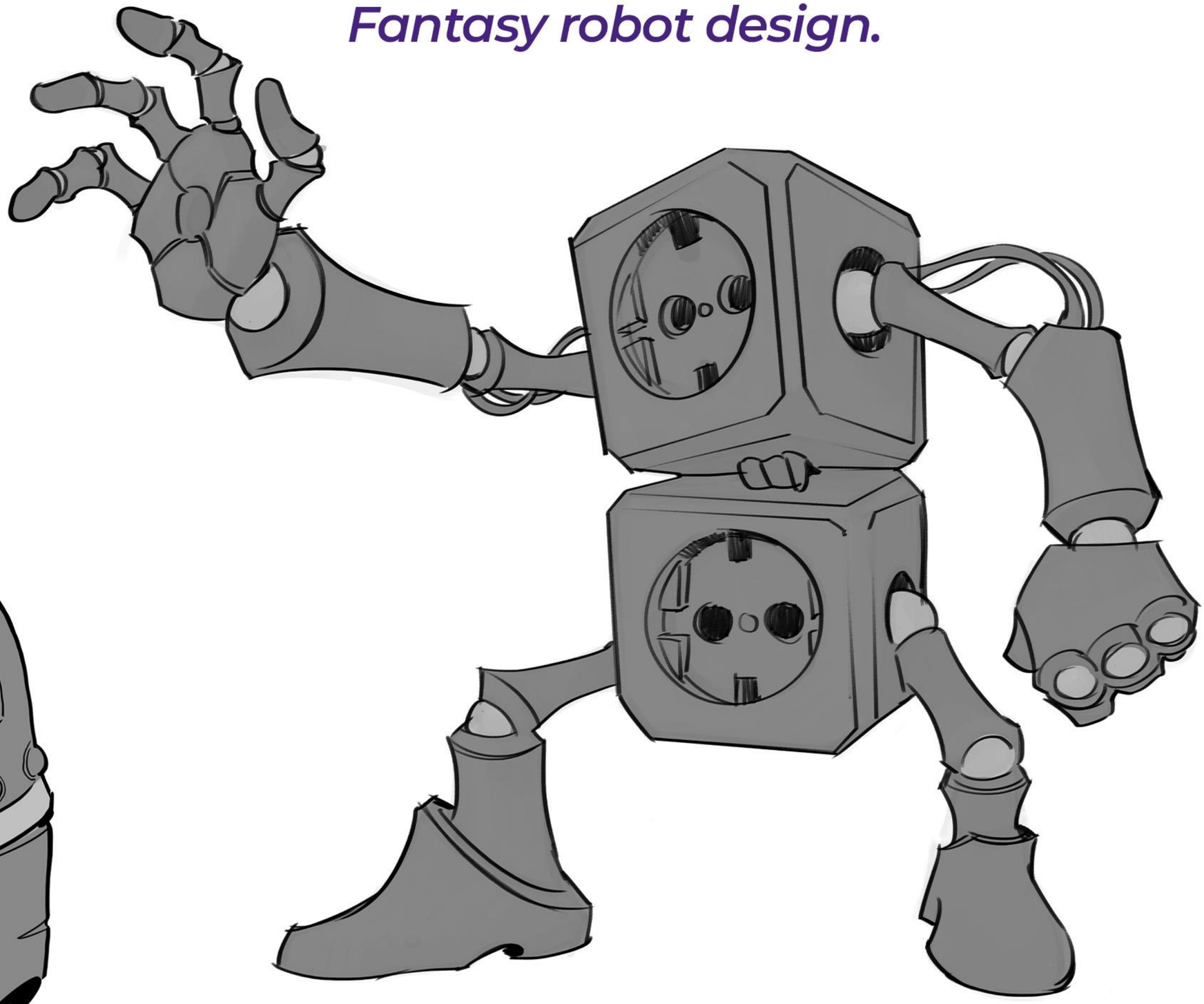
By having elements interlock and overlap, as well as respecting the common types of joints seen in robotics, we can easily make mechs that look believable!



Fantasy robot design.



Ball-and-socket joints are more commonly associated with organic forms or doll figures.

Some fantastical robotic designs do feature ball-and-socket joints, but these are sometimes referred to as 'magical joints,' as they don't clearly explain how they connect to a mechanical structure.

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Robot Joints (4/4)

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We don’t have to show every detail in a mecha or robot, as certain elements can be hidden in the armor.

However, the joints are usually exposed, so it’s important to remember how to design them.

Learn to sketch cool mechs in [this video]

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Speeding Shapes (1/4)

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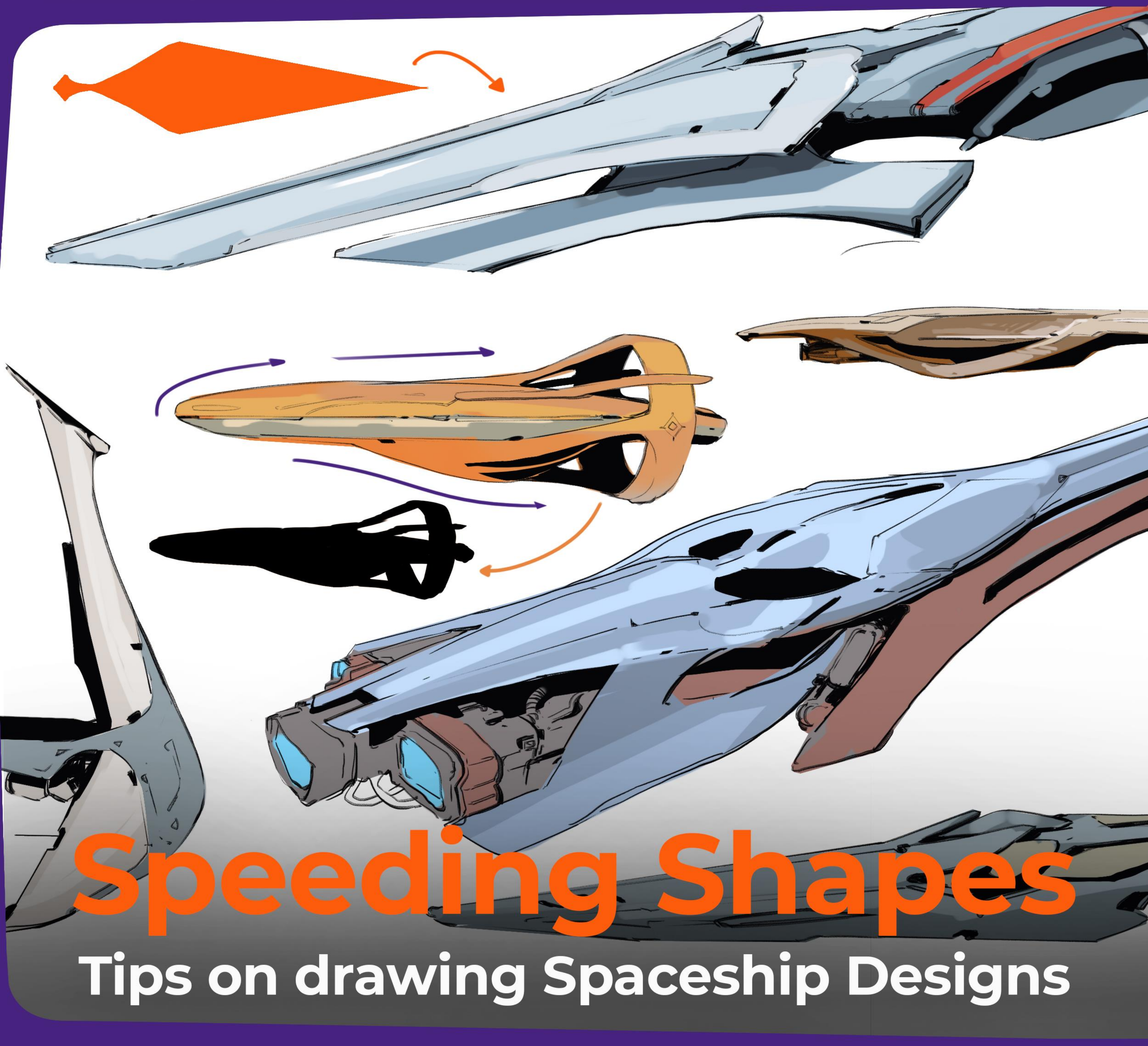

Speeding Shapes

Tips on drawing Spaceship Designs

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Speeding Shapes (2/4)

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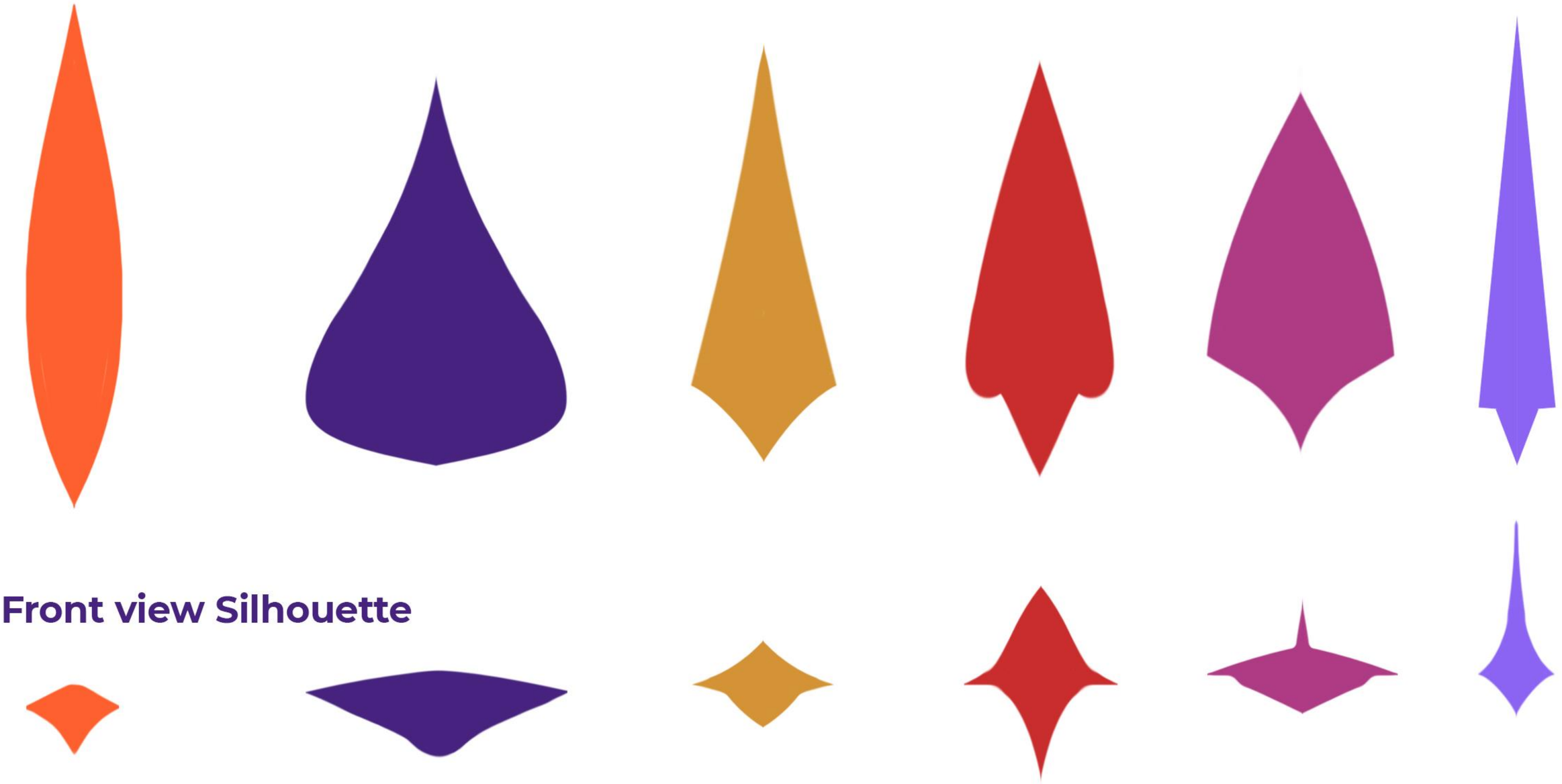
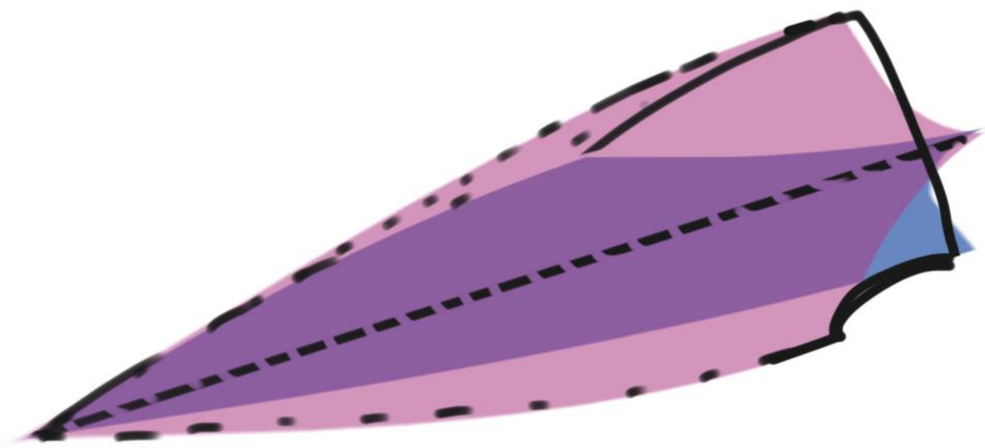
Top view Silhouette



Front view Silhouette

1. Start with simple shapes
2. Think how it looks from front view or even side view
3. Add any other structural shapes for the silhouette after you have a solid base.

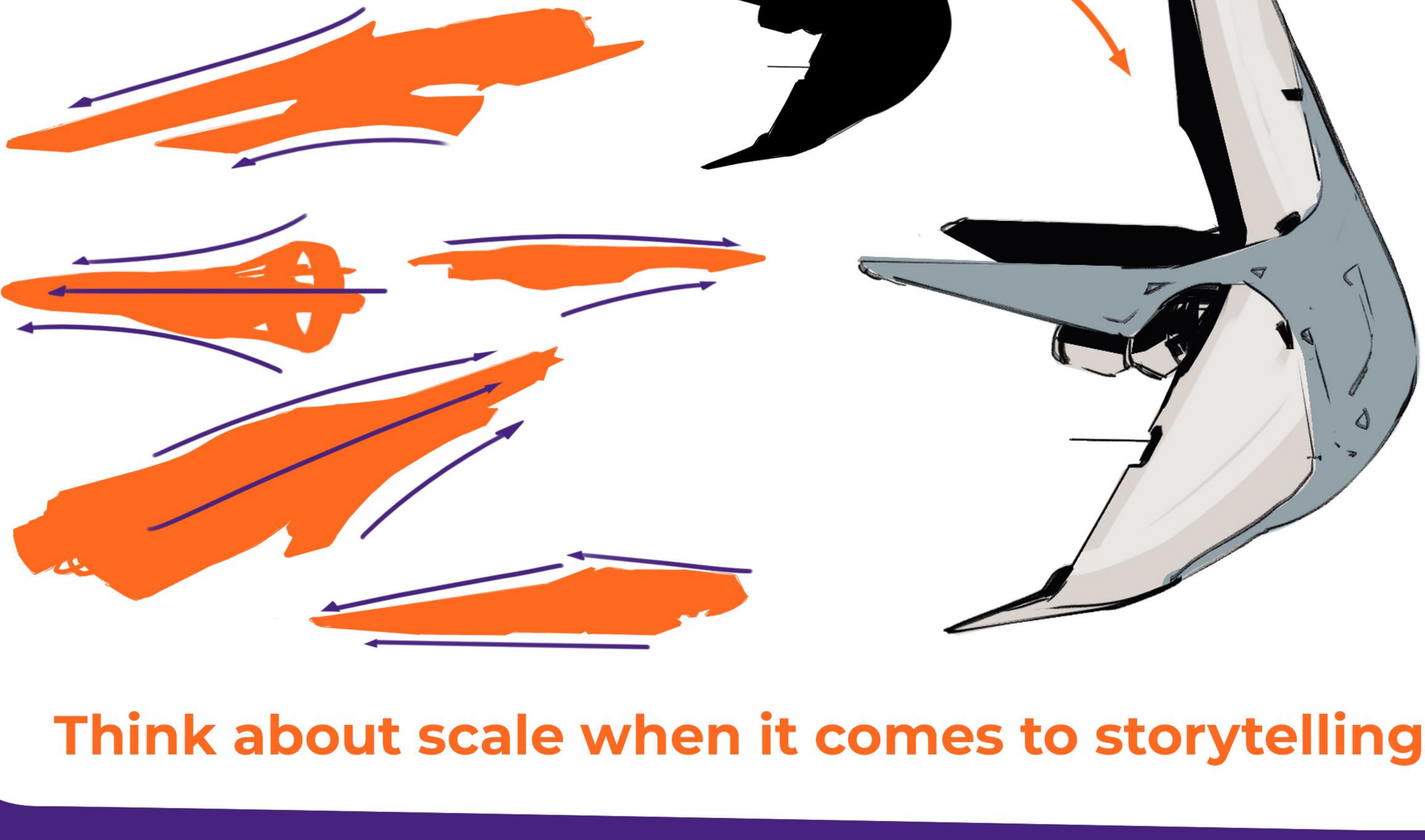


Shapes

Let us go into Shapes that communicate Speed

Think about a point of incidence - every arrow has to move towards one point of incidence, that in itself creates an arrow shape - and that is what suggests speed.

Think of the pointy end!



Think about scale when it comes to storytelling.

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Speeding Shapes (4/4)

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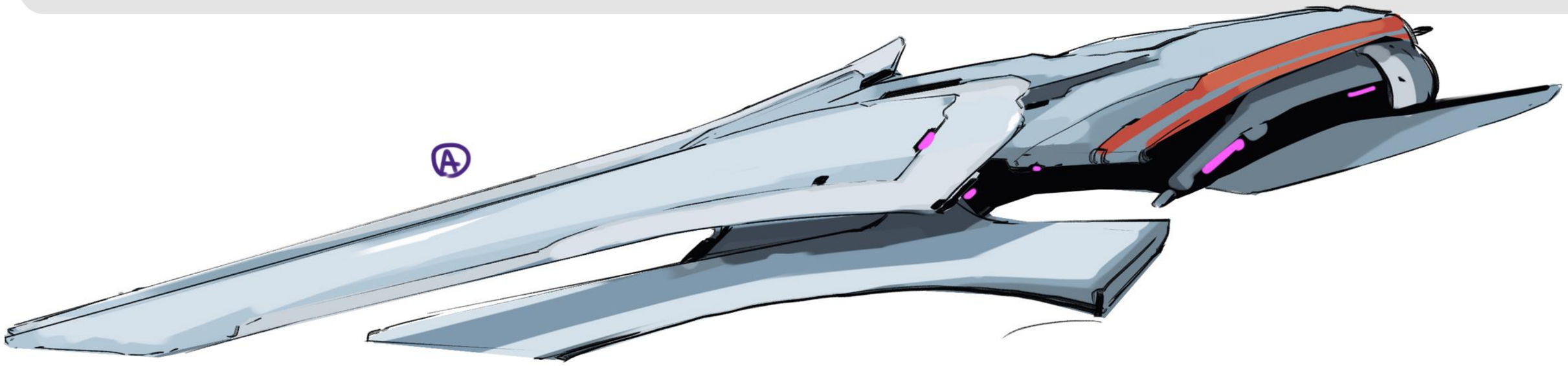
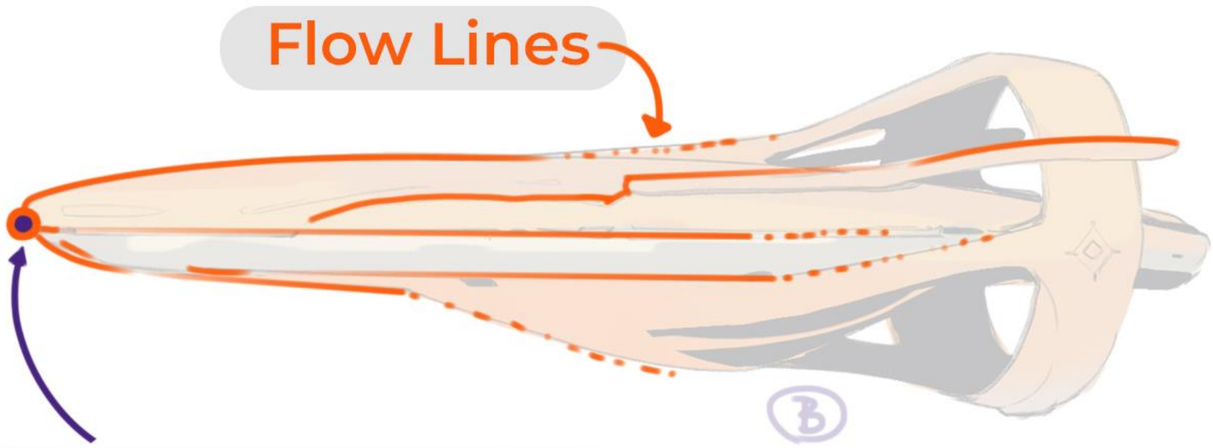
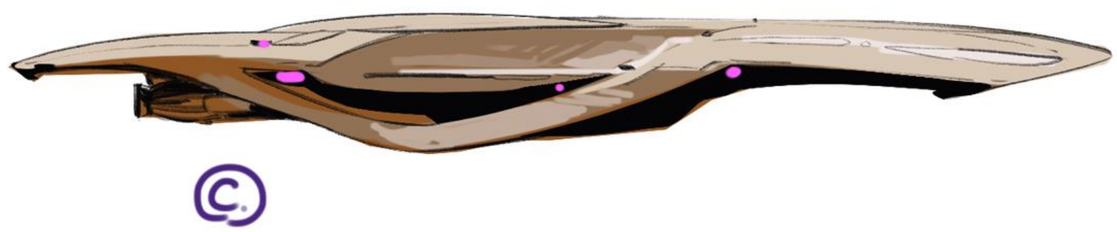
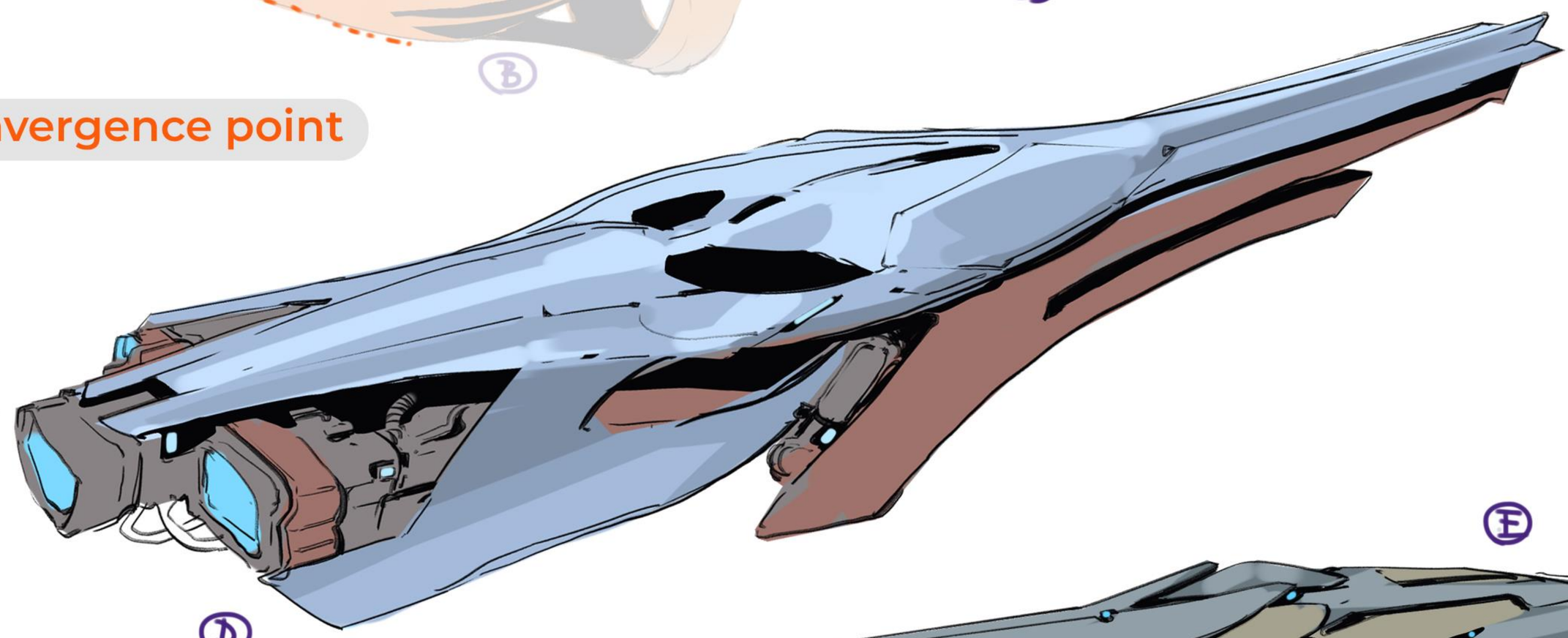
Play with various angles

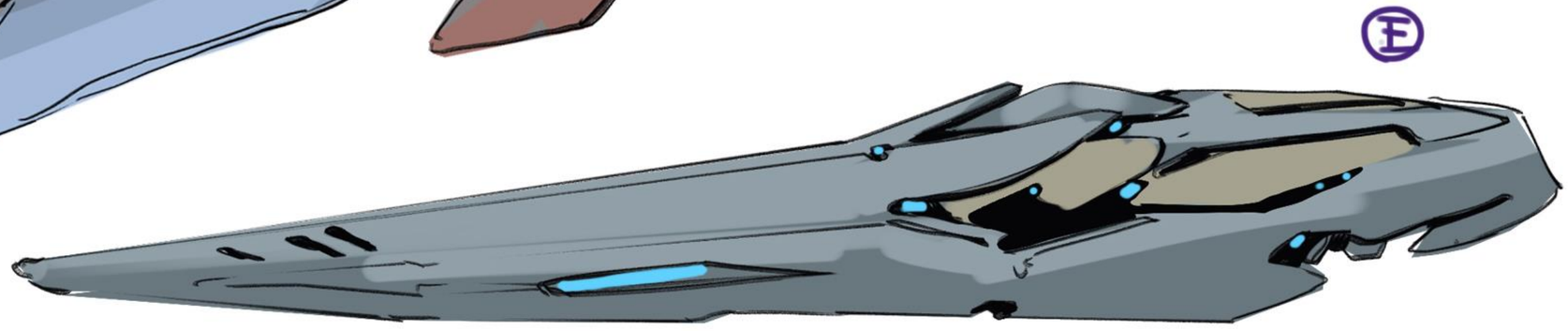
After you build some base shapes - it's time to figure out the interior parts.











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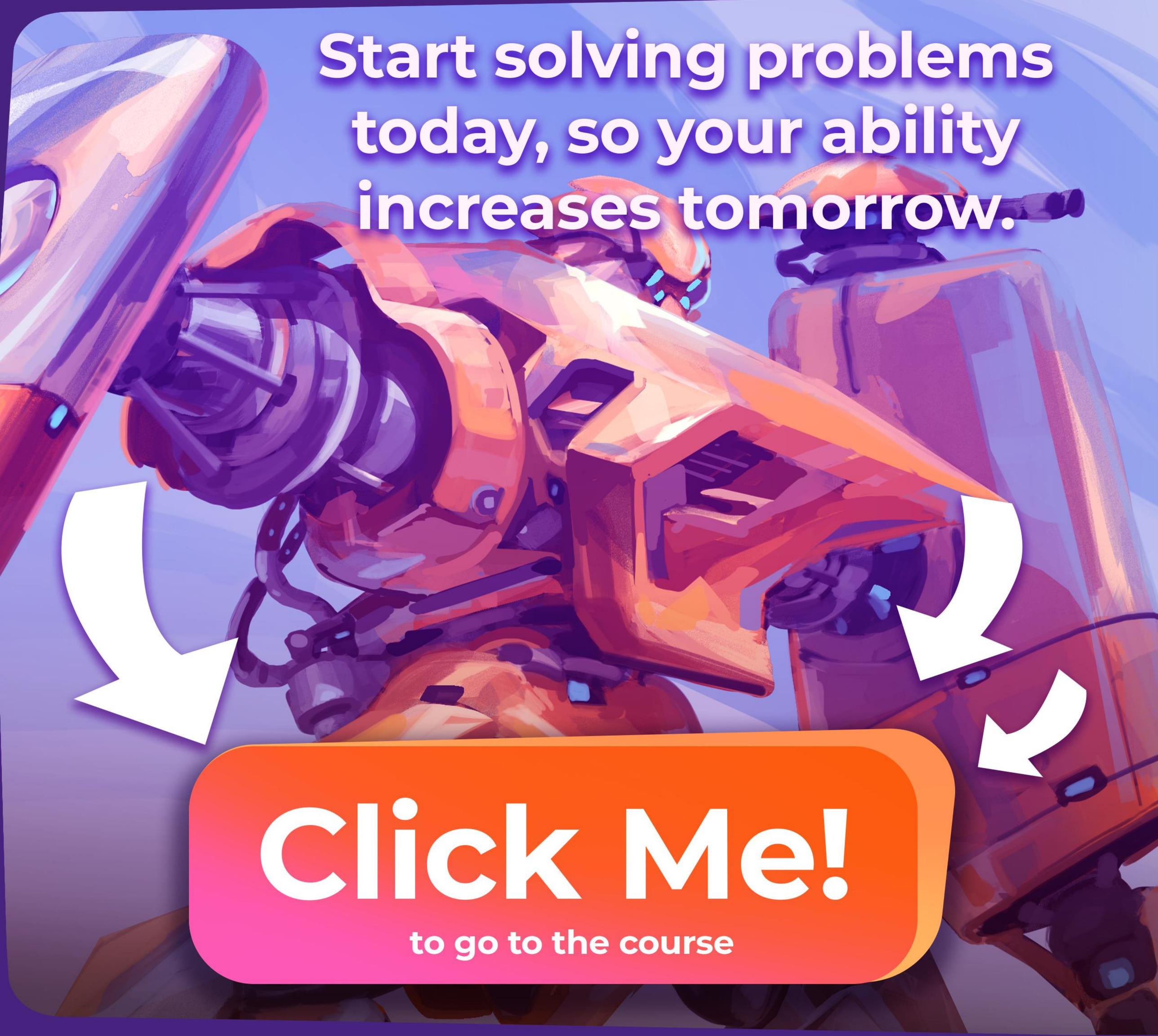

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STORYTELLING Cheat Sheets

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Characters & Creatures 384

Environments & Scenes 401

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Story Clues (1/3)

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Story Clues

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Story Clues (2/3)

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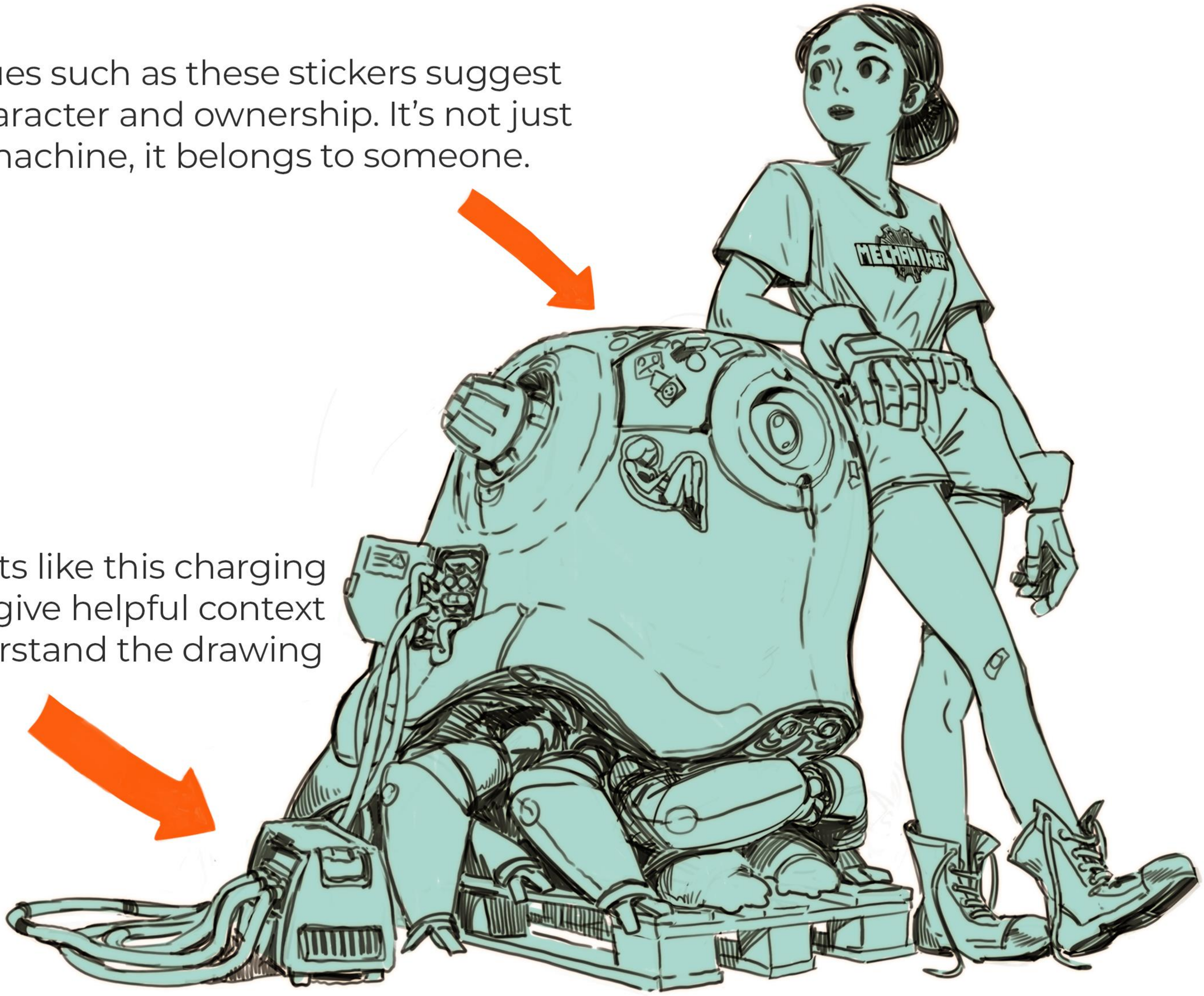
A lot of **story**, **character**, and **context** can be conveyed through little **clues** in the artwork.
Details and secondary elements can support the main idea of a scene.

Clues such as these stickers suggest character and ownership. It's not just a machine, it belongs to someone.

Elements like this charging station give helpful context to understand the drawing fully.



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Story Clues (3/3)

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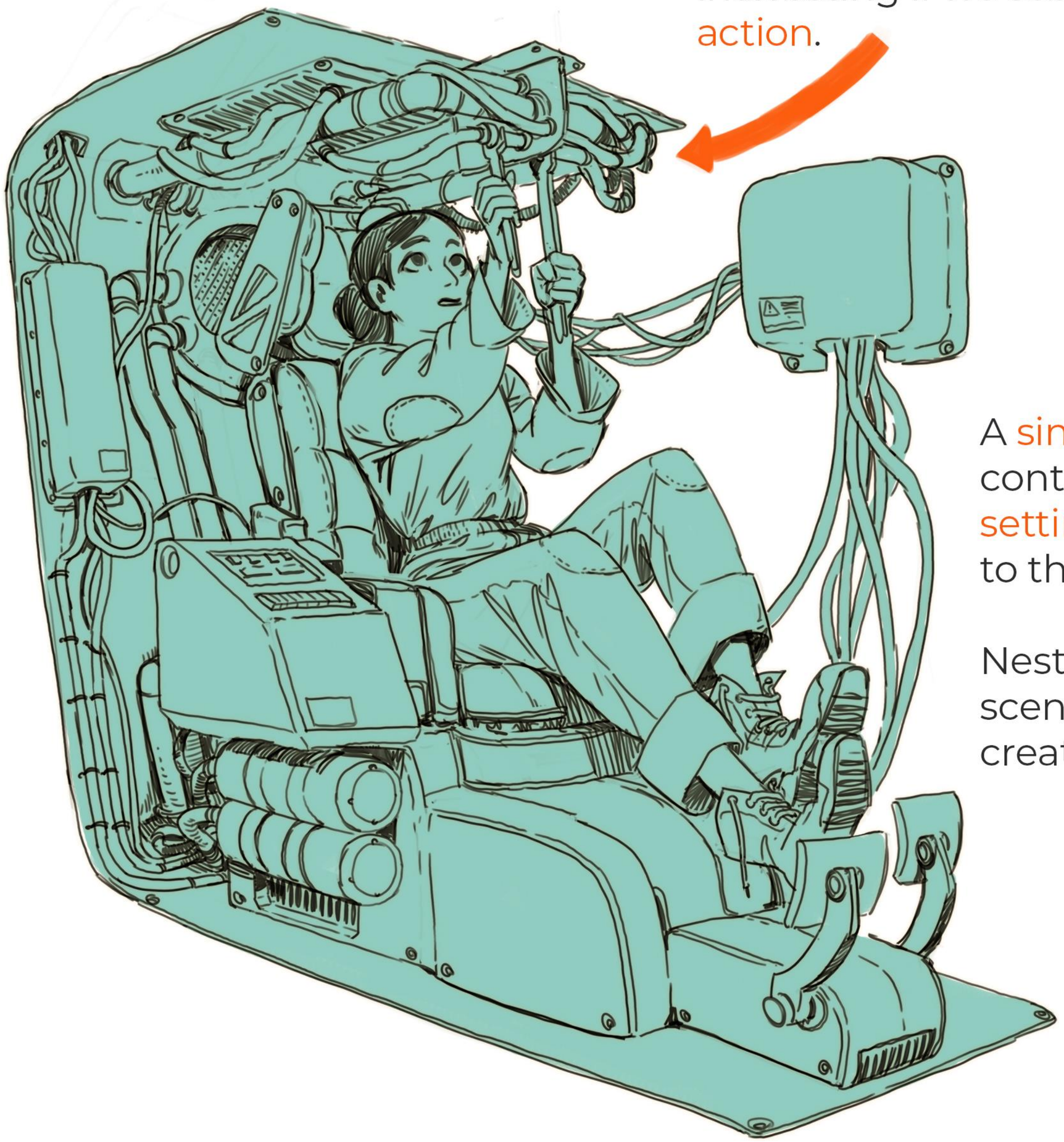
Interactions with the environment or items adds life to a scene. Simple topics become more interesting if we see a character in action.



A simple character can be contrasted with a complex setting to add visual interest to the artwork.

Nestling characters into a scene is a simple way to create context and tell stories.

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Telling Small Stories (1/3)

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Telling small Stories

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Telling Small Stories (2/3)

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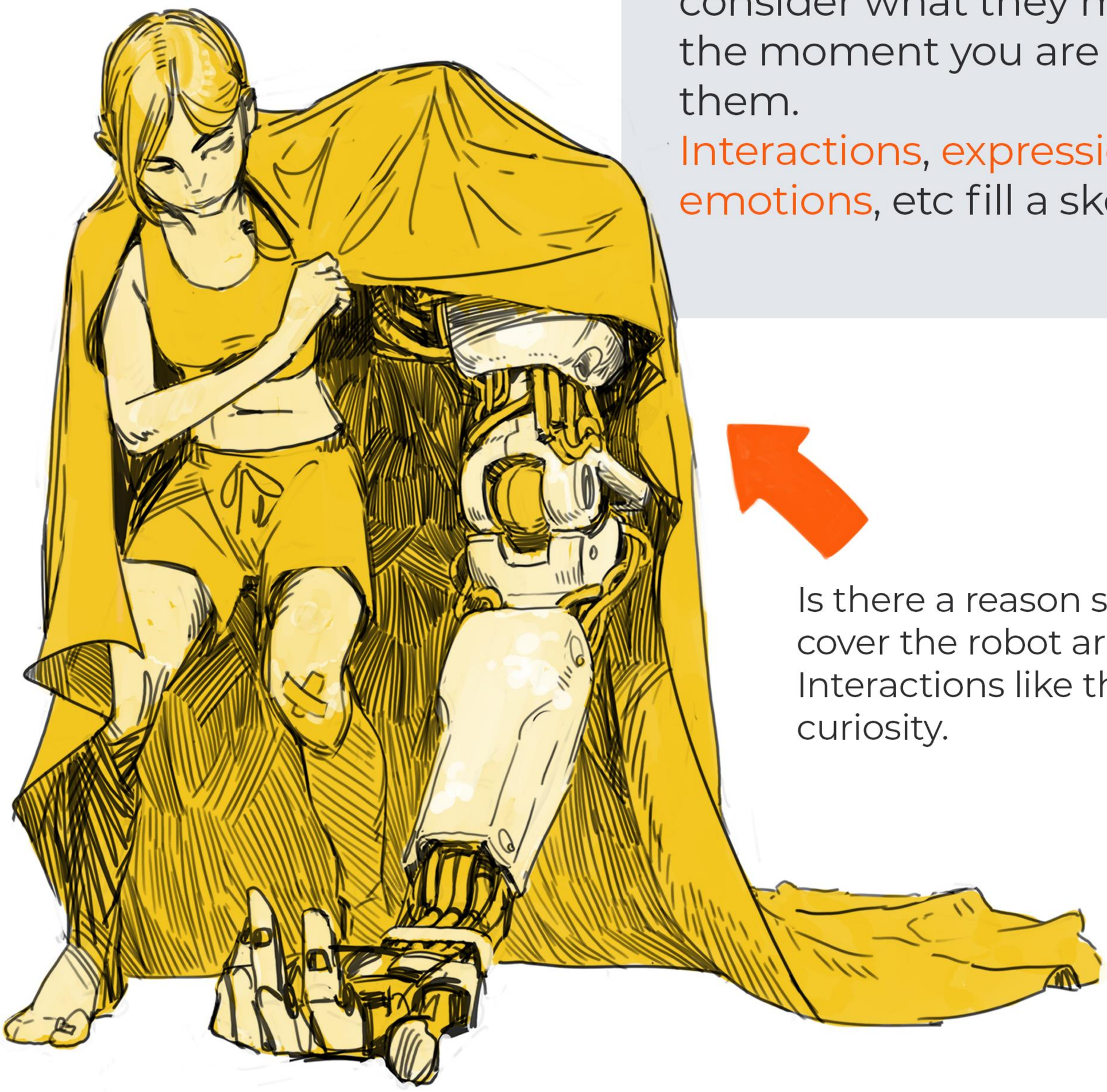

When sketching characters, consider what they might do in the moment you are sketching them.
Interactions, expressions, emotions, etc fill a sketch with **life**.

Is there a reason she tries to cover the robot arm?
Interactions like this can arouse curiosity.

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Telling Small Stories (3/3)

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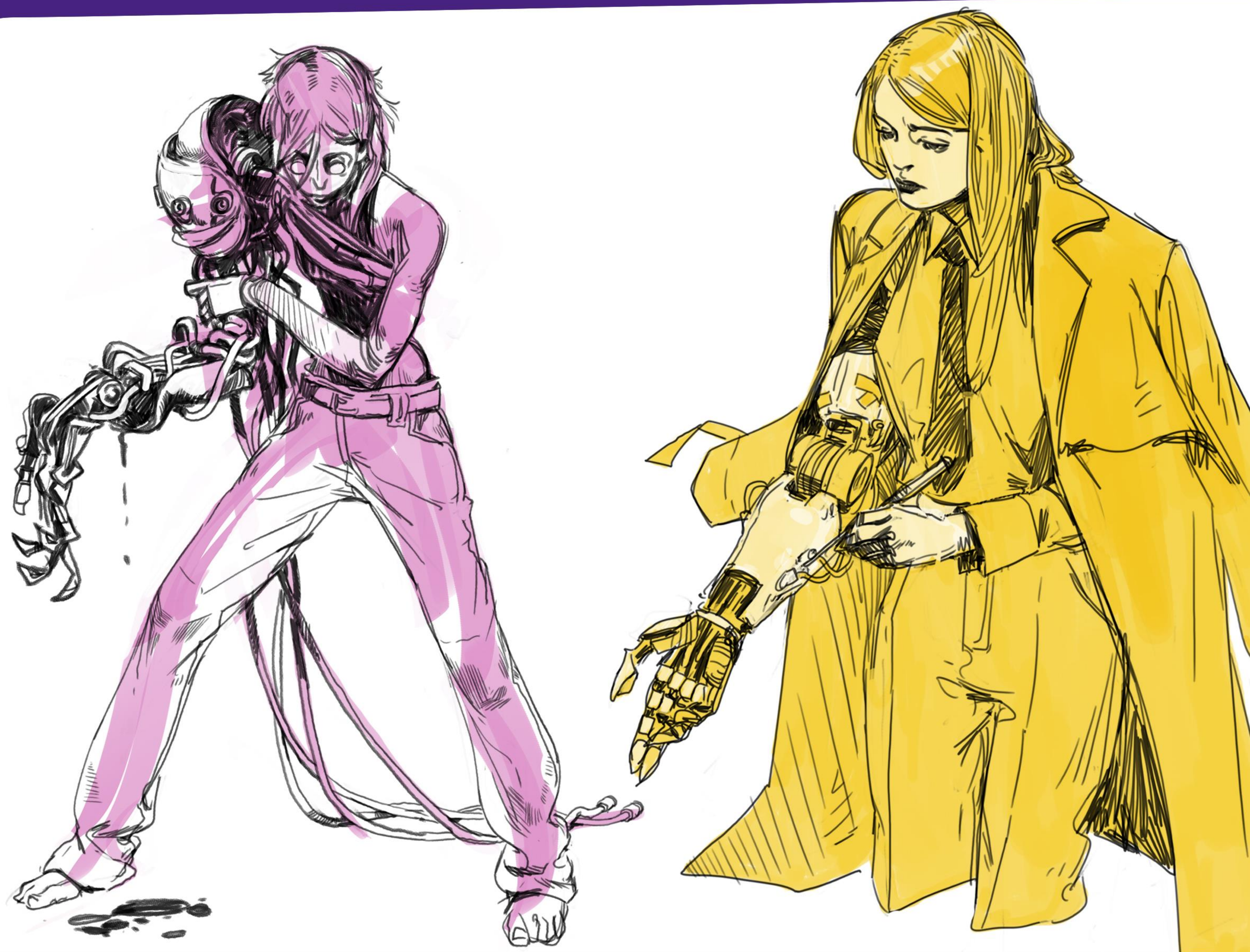

We can make a design or character more interesting by infusing the sketch with story. What is the situation we see them in? Are they happy, sad, angry? Answering these kinds of questions can lead us to more lively sketches.

Visign Cheat Sheets : Storytelling

Sketching Groups (1/4)

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Sketching Groups

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Sketching Groups (2/4)

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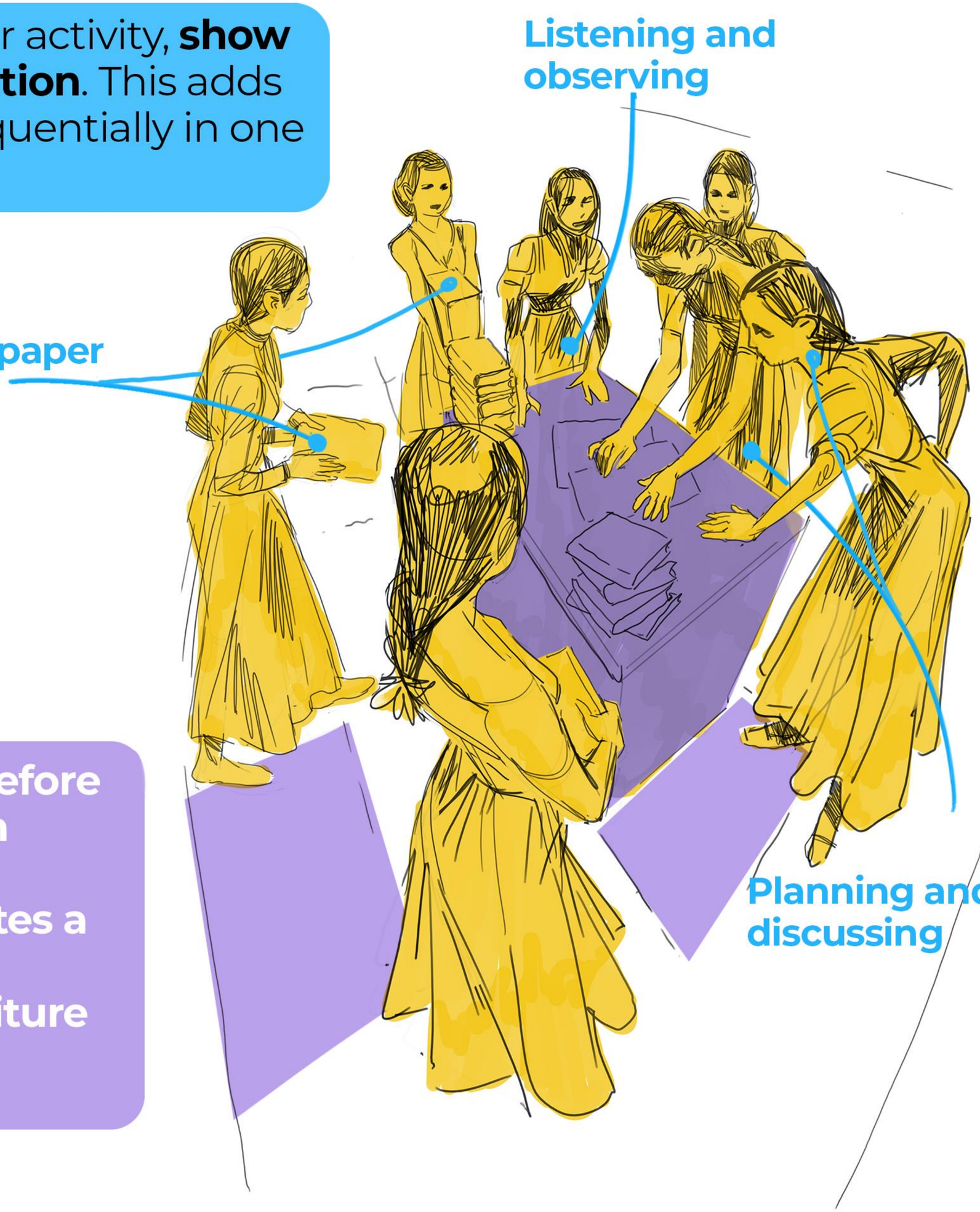
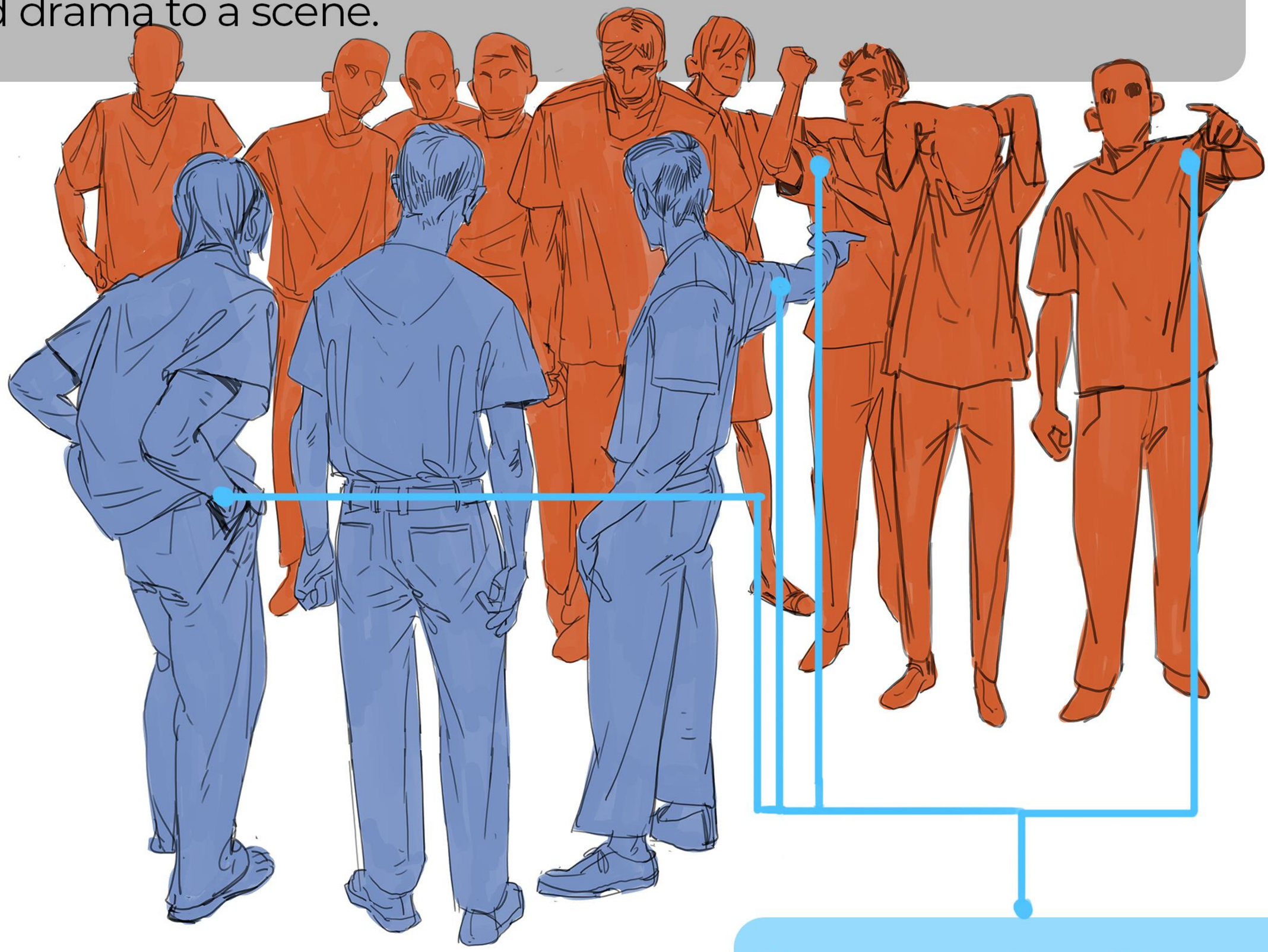
If characters share a similar activity, **show different stages of the action**. This adds variety and tells a story sequentially in one image.



Sketching simple forms before adding the characters can make drawing them in perspective easier. It creates a point of reference.
Ground tiles, rugs, or furniture work well.

Confrontation between groups is a great trope to **add tension** and drama to a scene.



Use **asymmetry** between two groups to up the stakes, tell an under-dog story, or show the strength/competence of the smaller group.

We can use various **different poses and gestures** to show the mental state of each character.

Visign Cheat Sheets : Storytelling

Sketching Groups (4/4)

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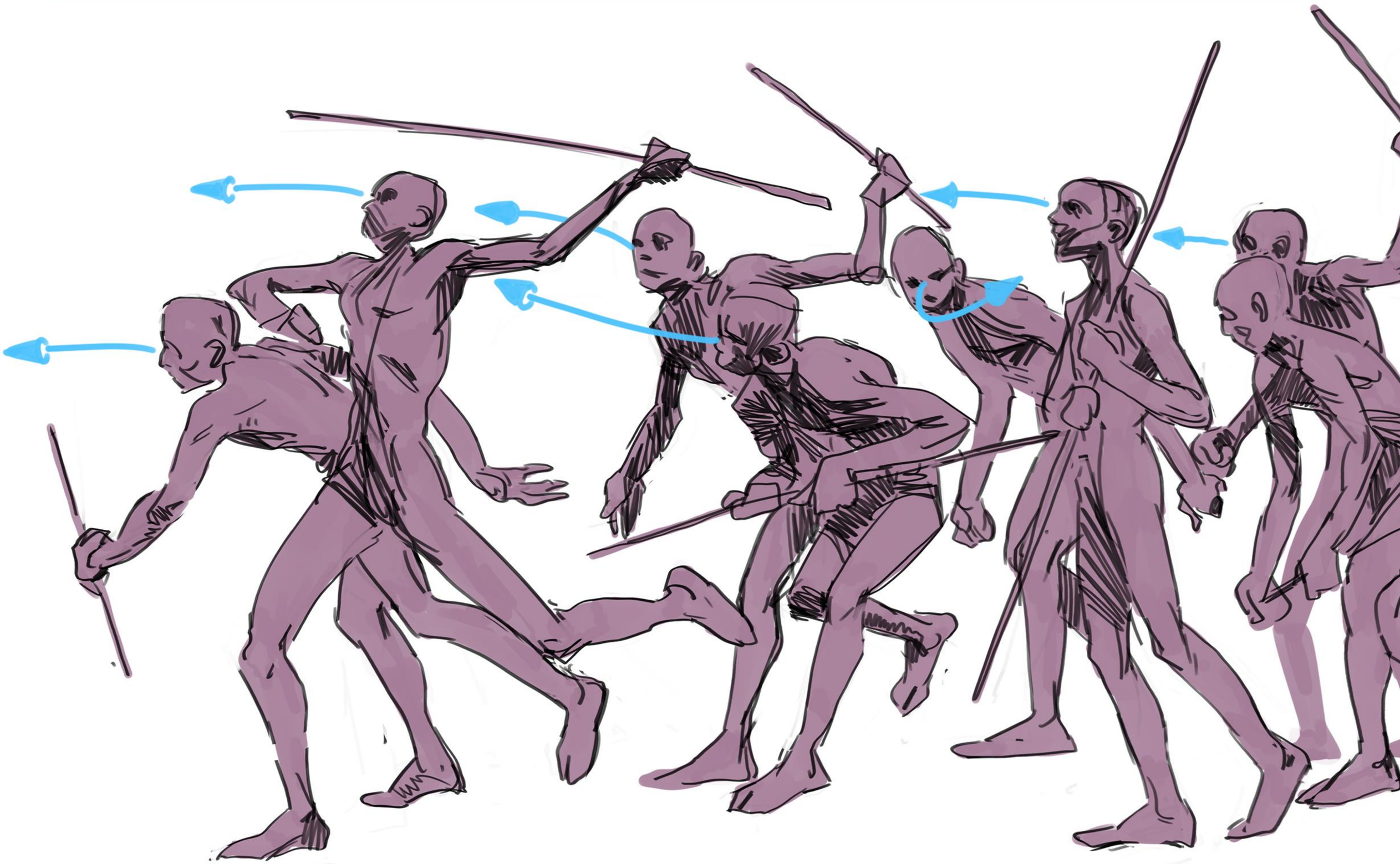
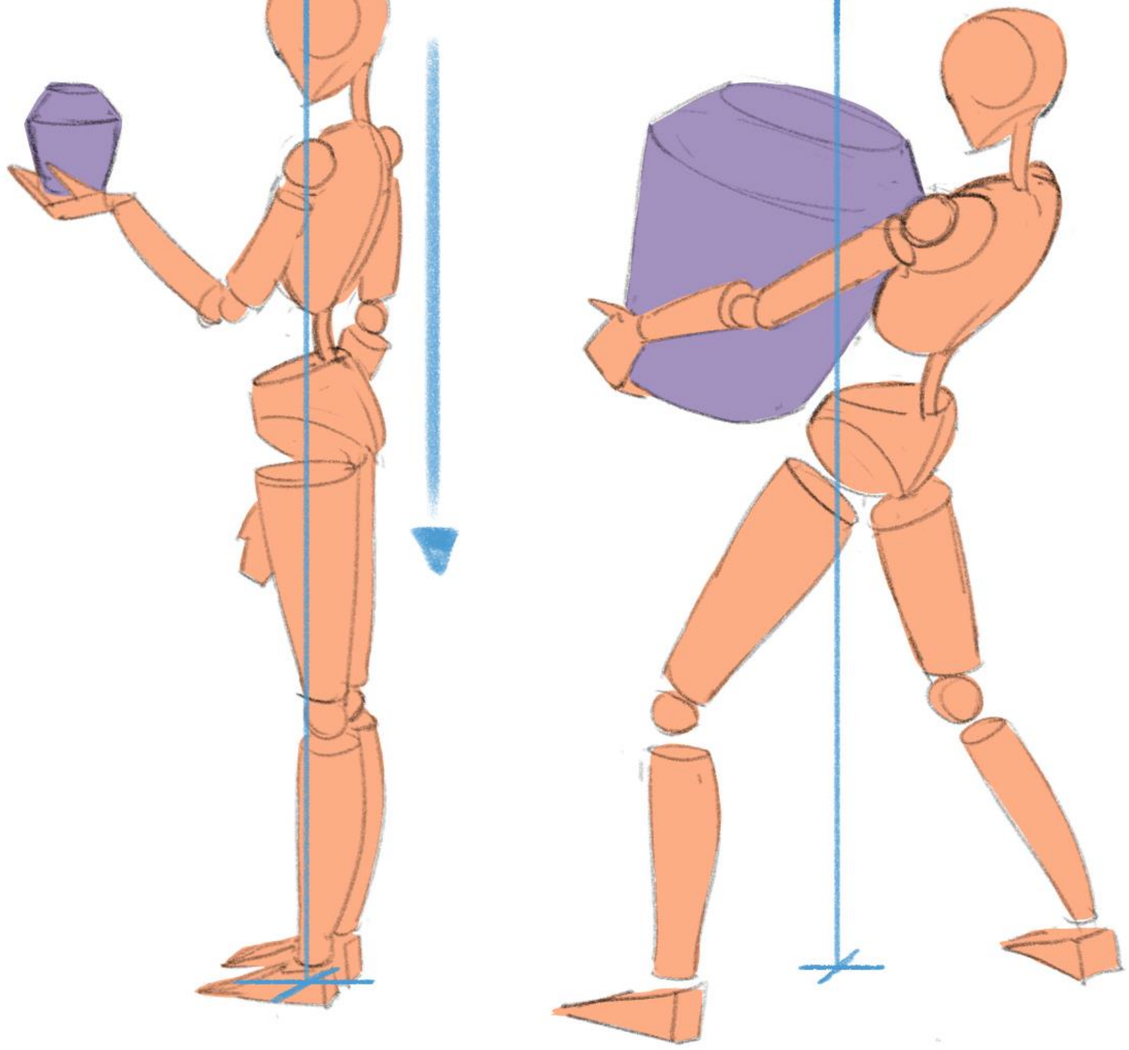
Pay attention to **where characters look** in a scene. The **gaze** can help **reinforce motion and action**, as well as **connect characters** with one another.



Gesture and Story

Exaggerating gesture helps to reinforce an action or a story.

The **weight distribution** in a character changes depending on the pose, held items, or story context.
The heavier the force, the more a character needs to compensate to maintain balance.



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Gesture and Story I (3/3)

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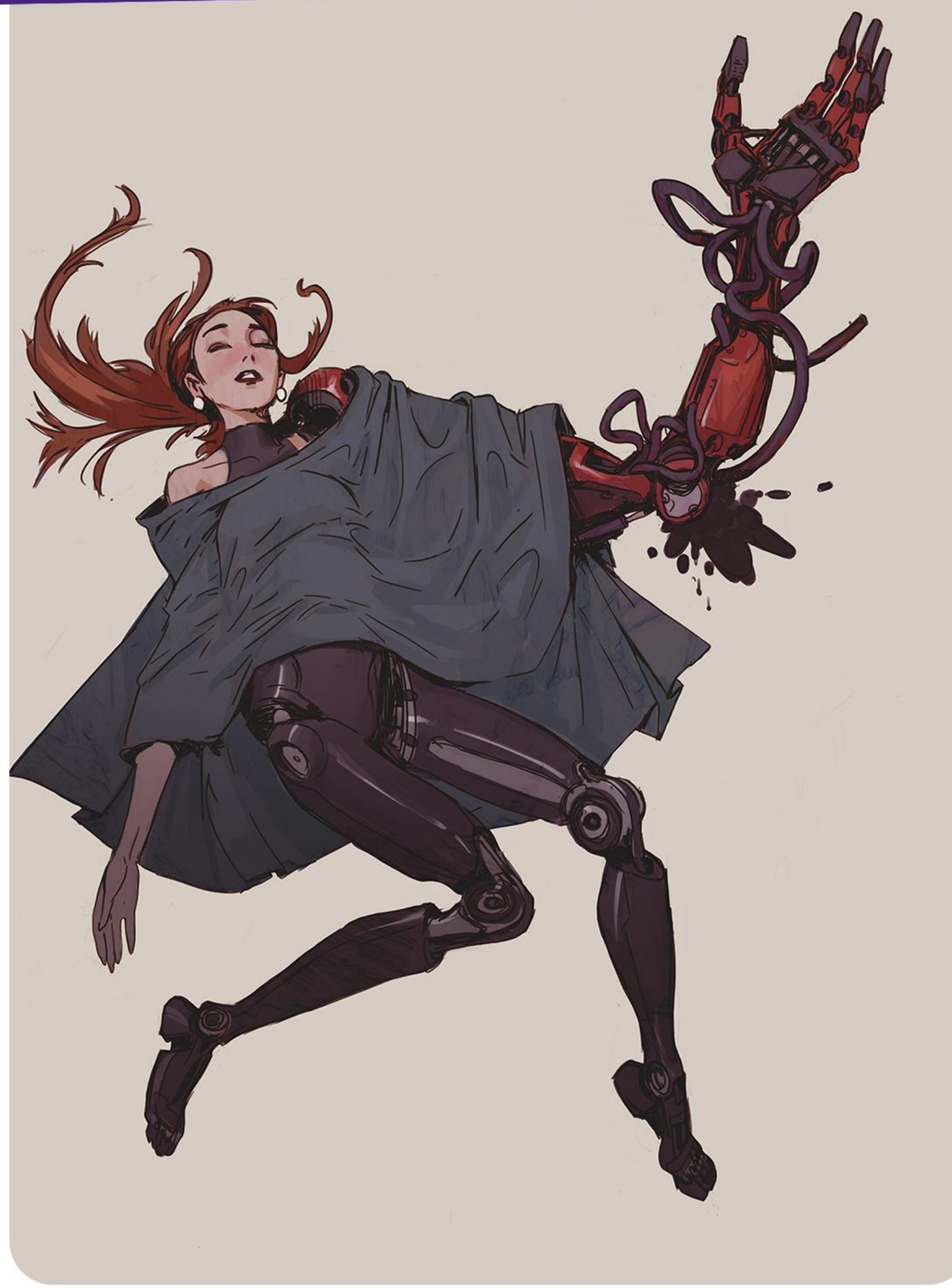
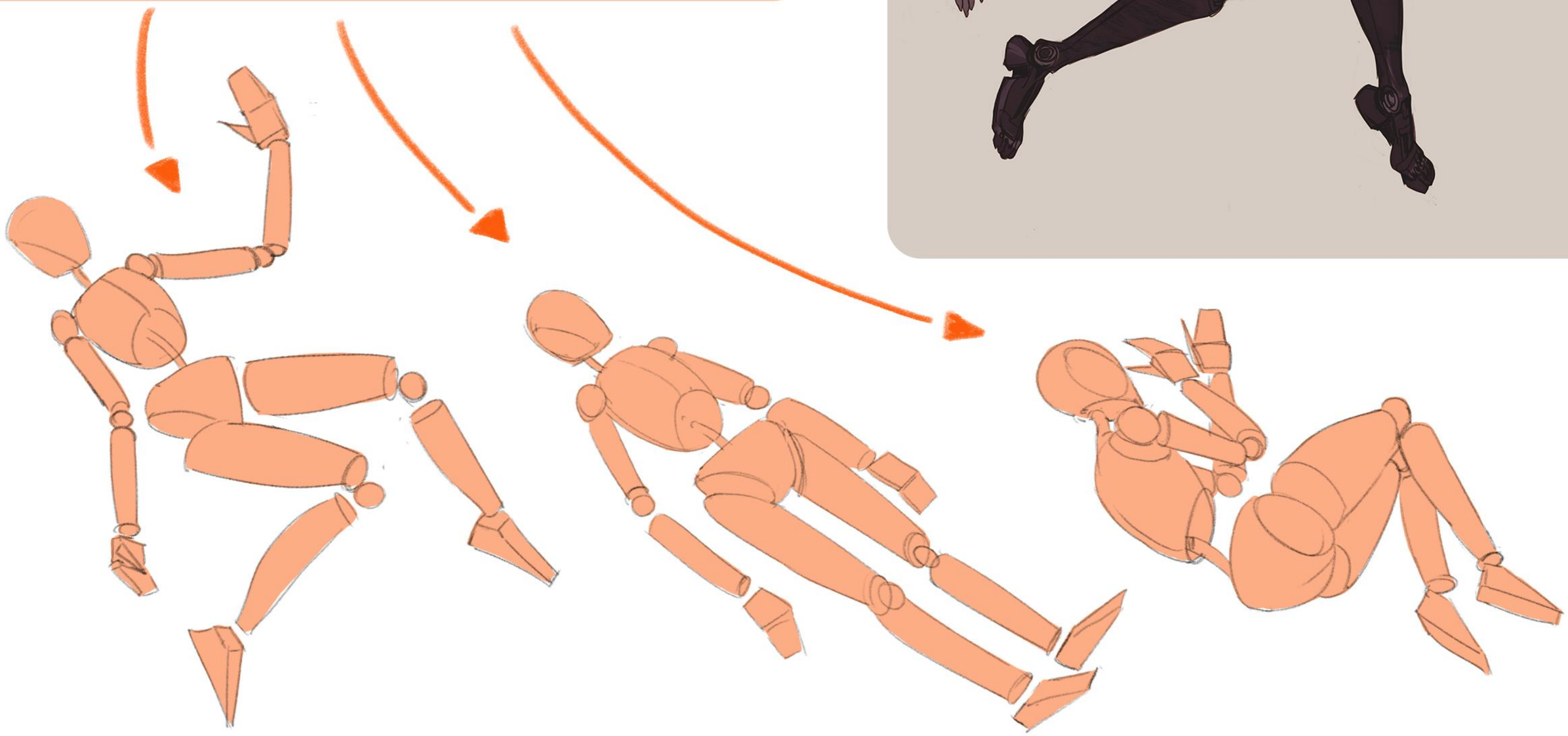
Even the pose of a fallen character requres some consideration.
Does the body appear resting, stiff, or fallen to the ground? This reveals a lot about the context, and can be the difference between completely different stories.



Each pose tells us a slightly different story. Sketching and **exploring variations** before settling on one can help clarify what gesture works best for the artwork.



Gesture and Story

Tips on Gesture and Storytelling

Visign Cheat Sheets : Storytelling

Gesture and Story II (2/4)

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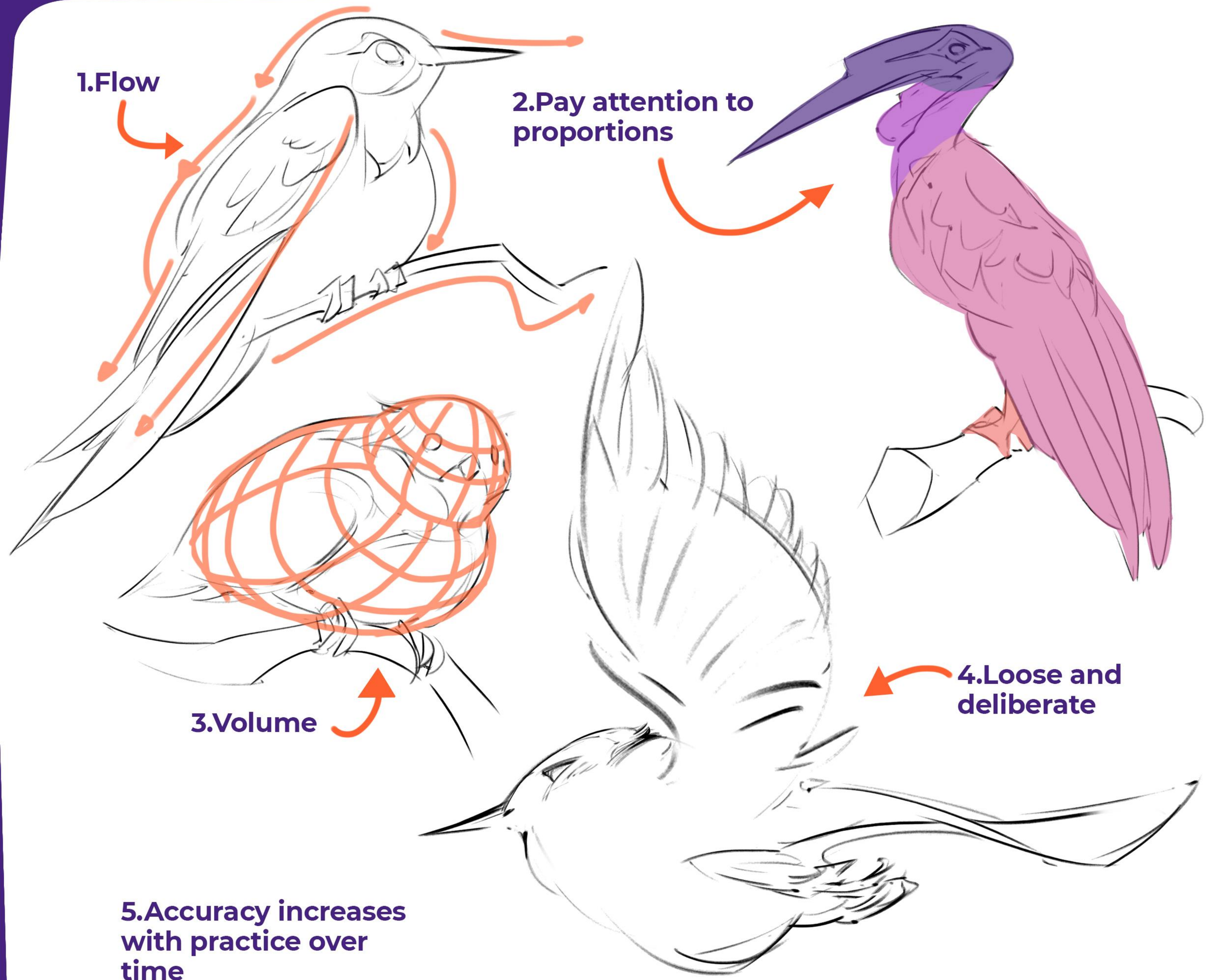

Sketching and Gesture

Let us go into discussing story

Scale can be an interesting shot taken at story. By attaching a character near the bird, we showcase a relationship there, and that there is something more to it.

Think about scale when it comes to storytelling.

Visign Cheat Sheets : Storytelling

Gesture and Story II (4/4)

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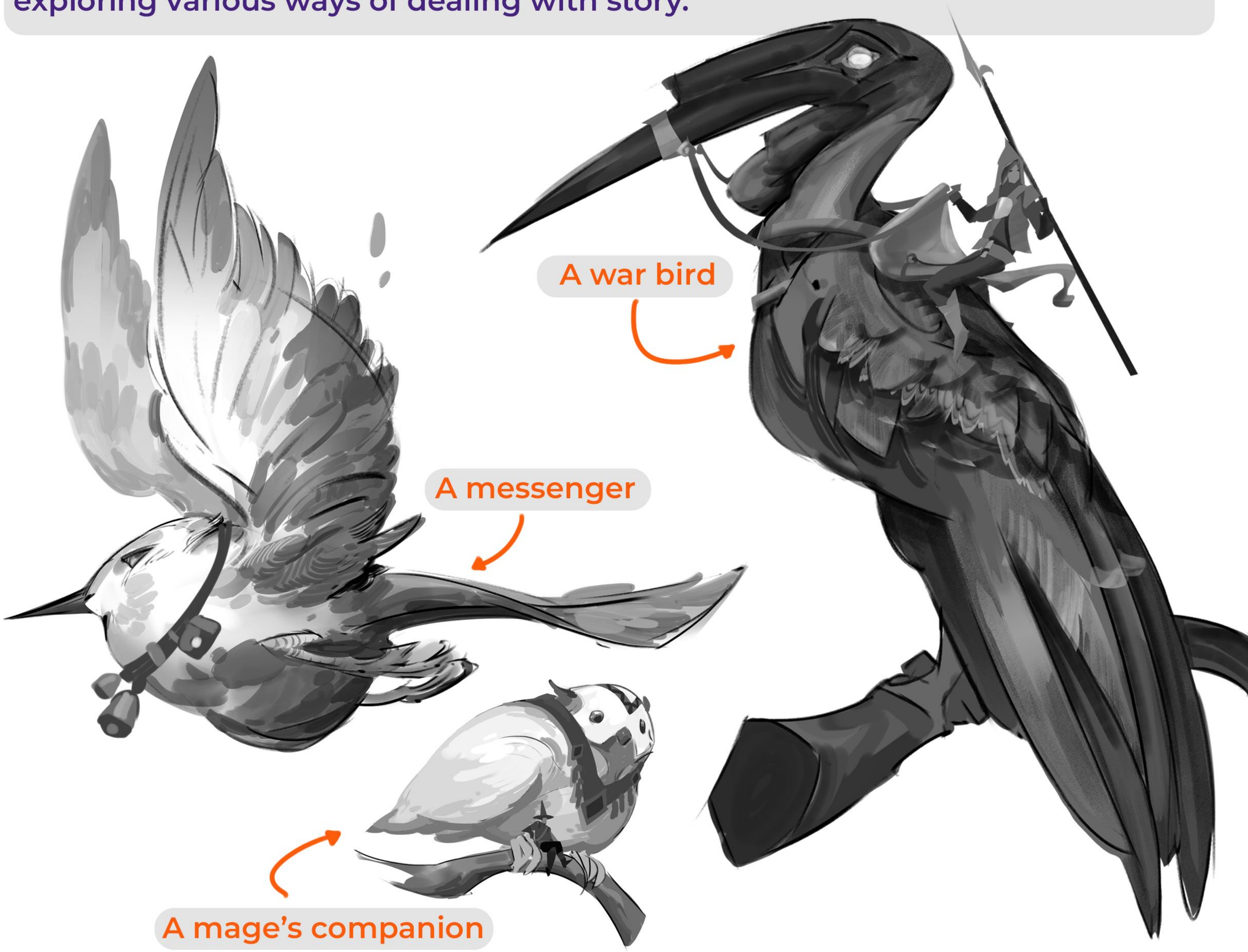
Variation

Anything created - you might want to try out things. Variation is key to usually exploring various ways of dealing with story.



The Monk

Tips on Reference and storytelling

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The Monk (2/4)

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Idea Phase

+

In the idea phase, we put a couple of references together and think how we can approach the whole scene. We will use the environment as a main reference, almost a full study - and add on top anything else we have on the right side.

Keep the process simple

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The Monk (3/4)

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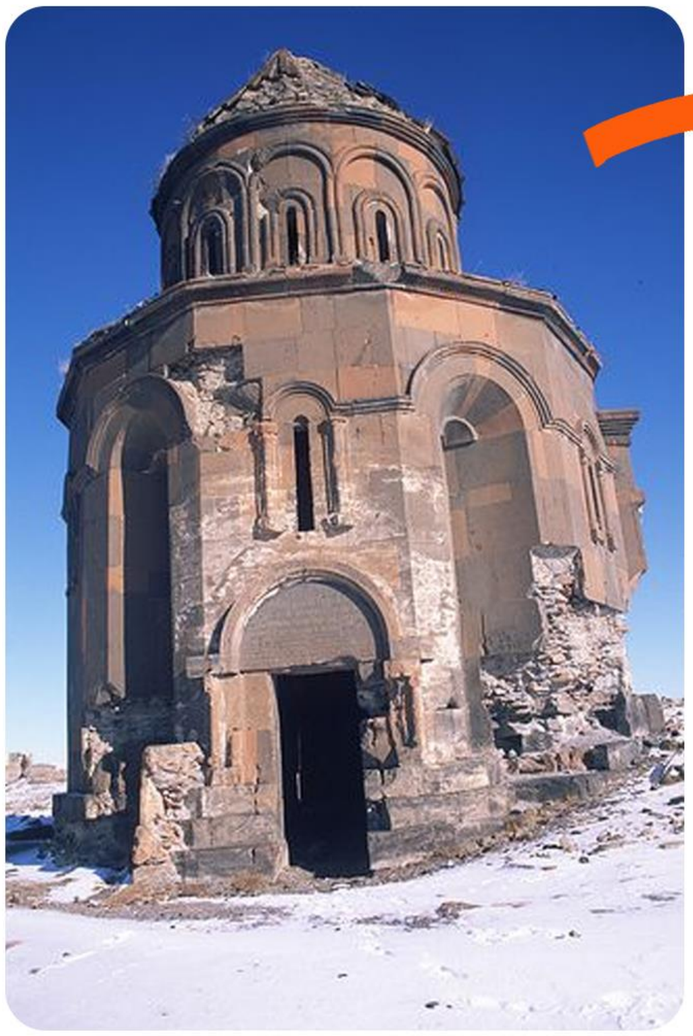
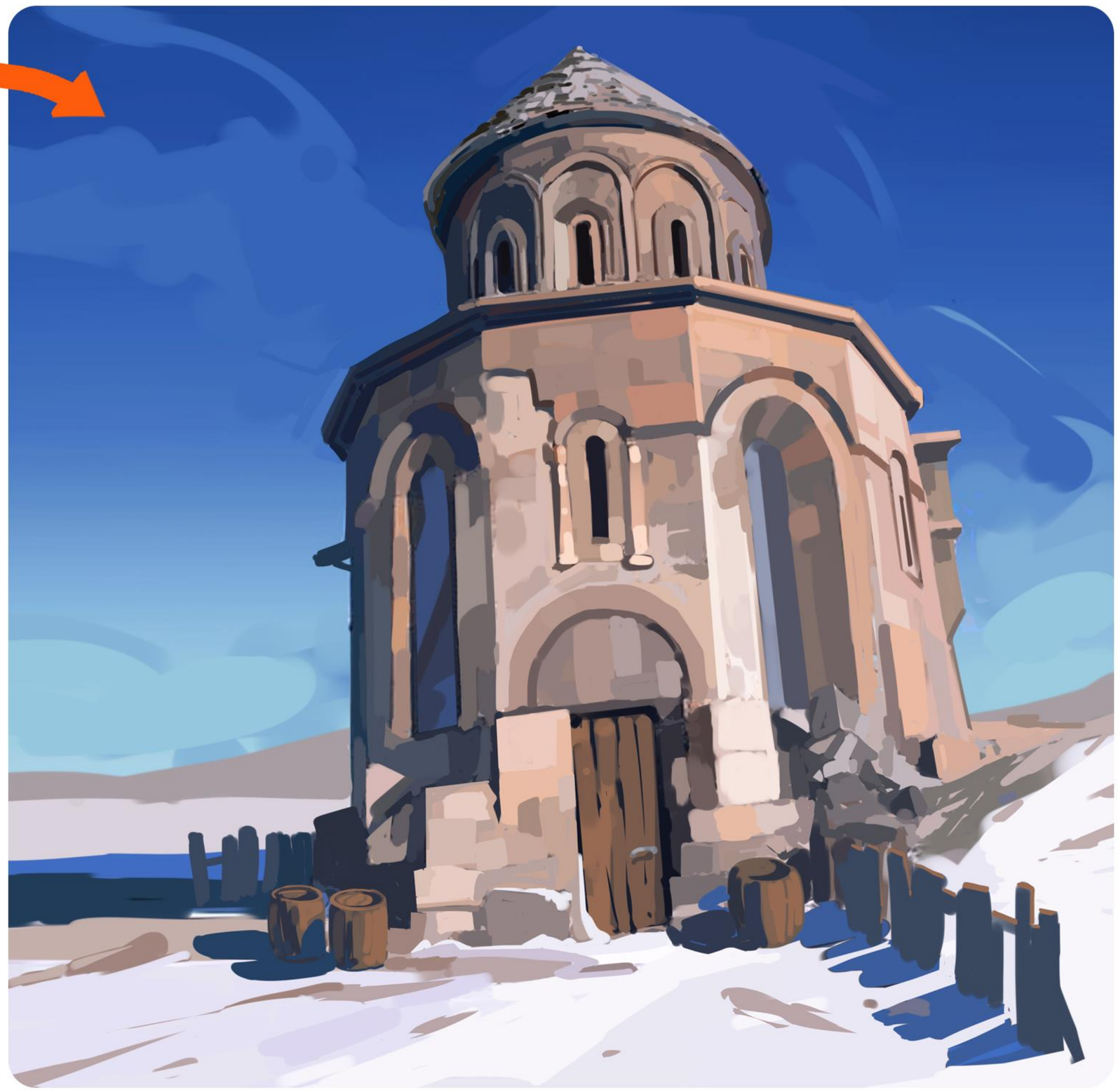
Let us go into Structure



Reference

Adding a door and a couple of other elements in the scene, will help us to give it a bit more life, hinting that someone lives there.



Working with the round flat brush and using selection will keep the process simple. Next we can add the storytelling elements.

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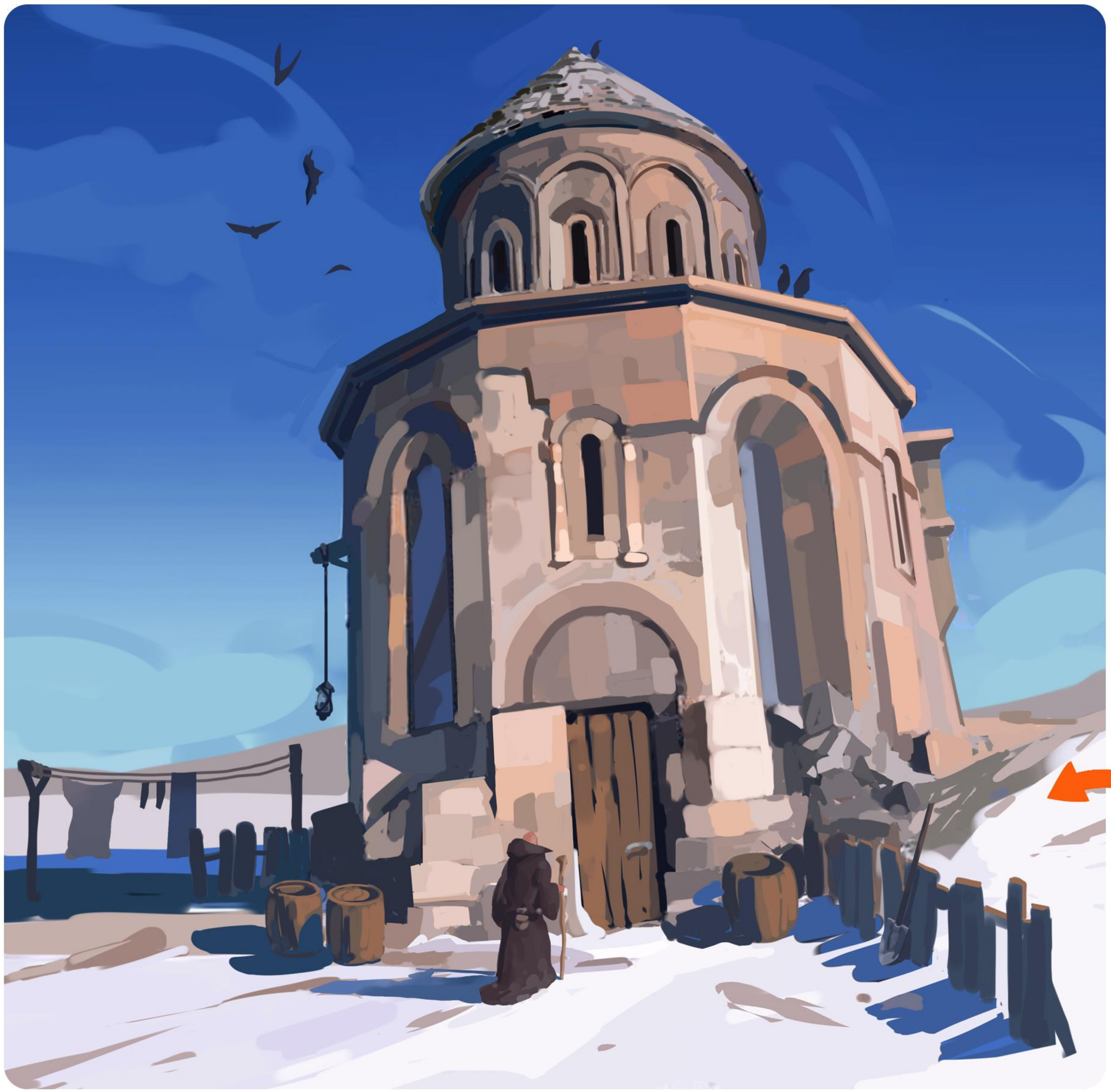

We add the initial elements, and now we have a scene with a monk, getting back to his home. We notice various elements that are used by the monk, which increases believability of the entire scene.

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Showing Motion (1/4)

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Showing Motion

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Showing Motion (2/4)

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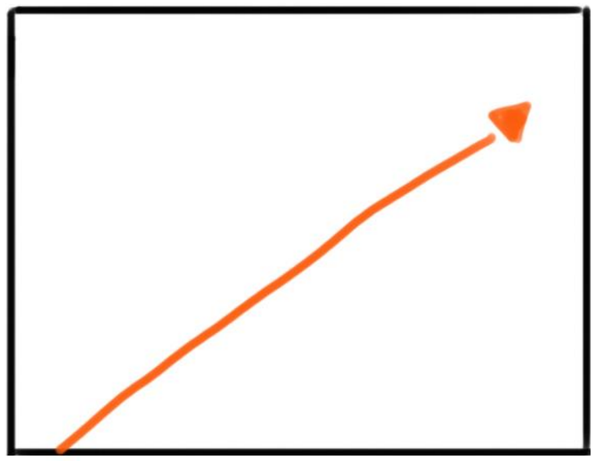
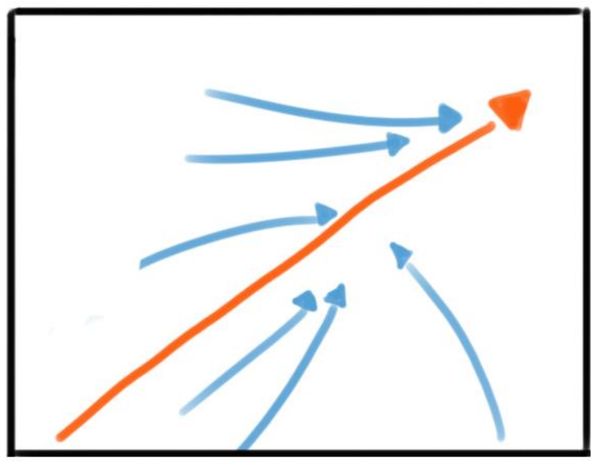
Motion in a still image can be achieved by using lines of action, as well as context clues.

Diagonal lines indicate motion, and the forward gesture of the figure and the flow of fabric reinforce it.





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Showing Motion (3/4)

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The motion of the diver is shown through his impact on the wall. The broken stone, flying debris and dust do more to convey the action than the line of motion in this case.

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Showing Motion (4/4)

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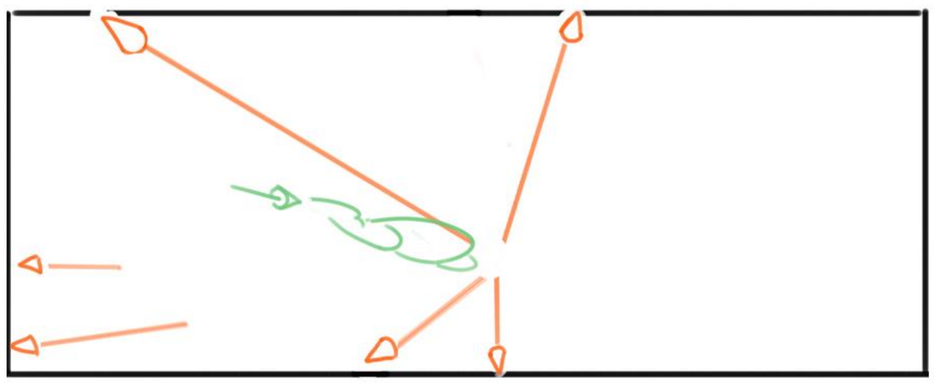
The motion in this scene is slightly more complex. The airships move towards the viewer, as well as away from one another.
This conveys a fierce fight, while the point of view makes us feel like we are in the midst of the action.

The vanishing lines help convey depth, while smoke and steam indicate the motion towards the viewer.
The tilt of the ships away from the center makes the scene appear more dynamic, as well as indicate a fight.



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A Magical Meeting

Tips on Storytelling and Space

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A Magical Meeting (2/4)

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Color Palette

Having a clear focus on mood - will put you on a clear path of doing your best on color. This is a process that will enhance storytelling - the little glimpse of light in the environment will already give us a sense that this place is active at this time.

Color Builds Mood

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A Magical Meeting (3/4)

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Think about an element that could generate questions on the viewer side.

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A Magical Meeting (4/4)

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Characters are simple - it's just a little mage with a simple hat.

Trajectory

If we pay attention to our scene, we notice a clear trajectory of the characters that starts from the front - goes in the back and up towards the moon.
This helps with creating the visual flow in the image.

Horror Lighting

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Horror Lighting (2/3)

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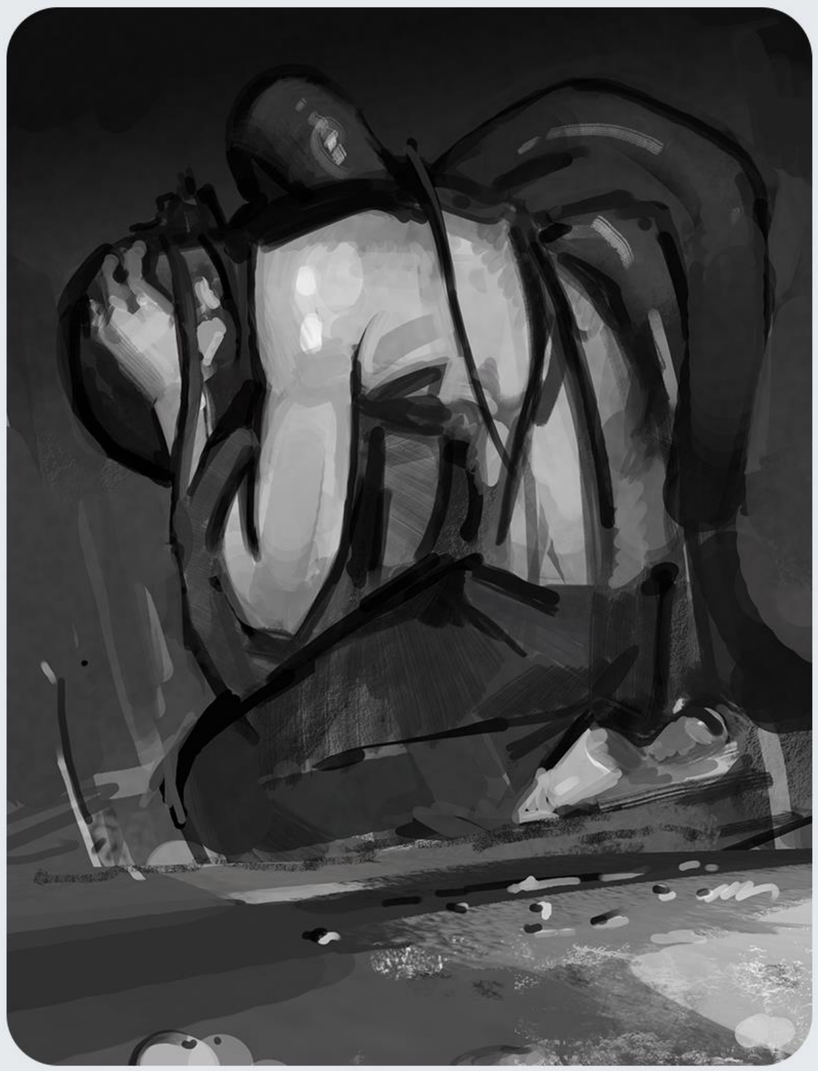
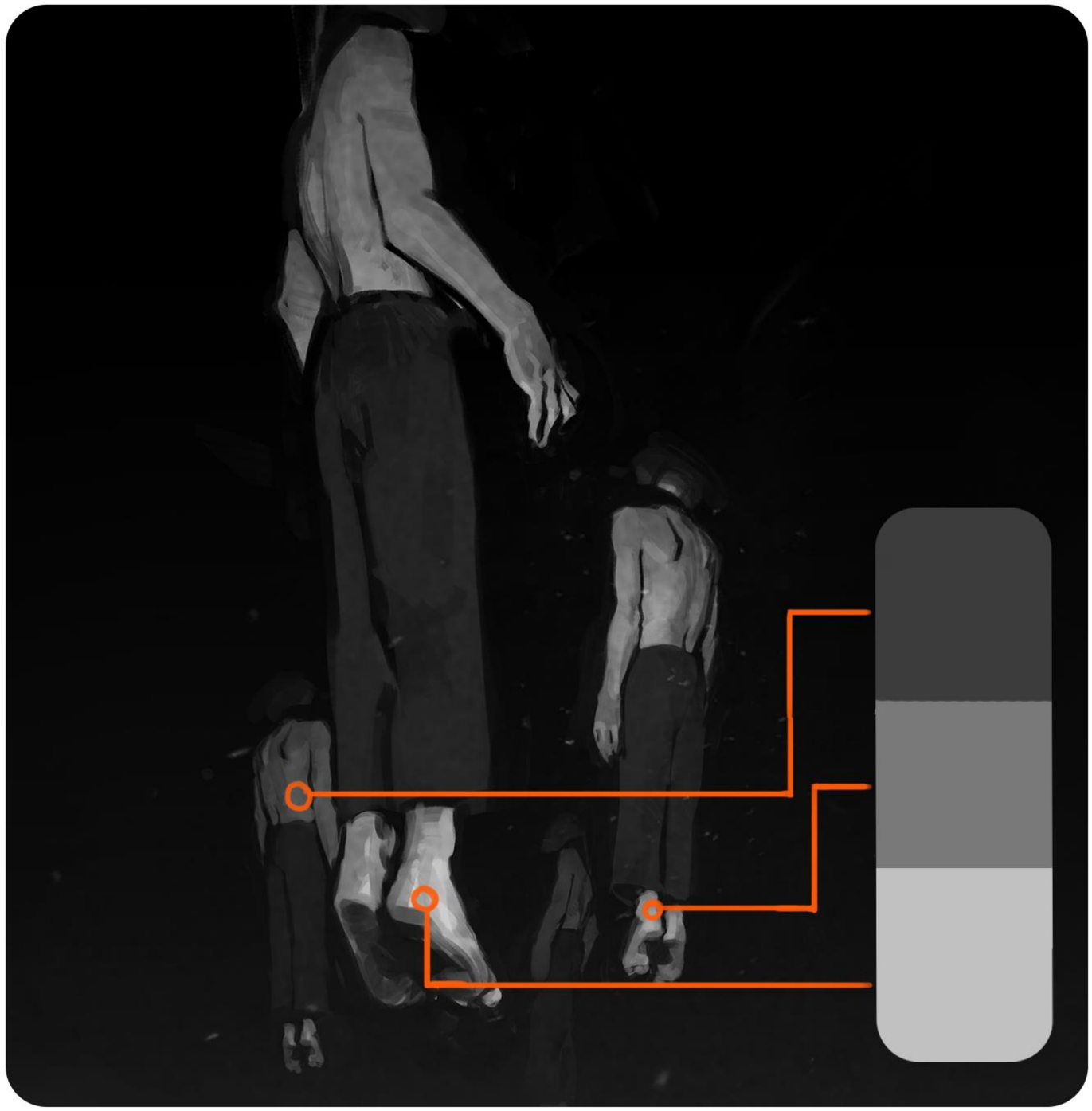
Found-footage horror relies on strong **flashlights**, **camera artifacts**, and the **first-person point of view**.



Viewing angle and poses can be more convincing if they don't appear staged.

Body-cam or CCTV footage can serve as helpful reference.



A quick fall-off of light suggests the effect of a weak flashlight.

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Horror Lighting (3/3)

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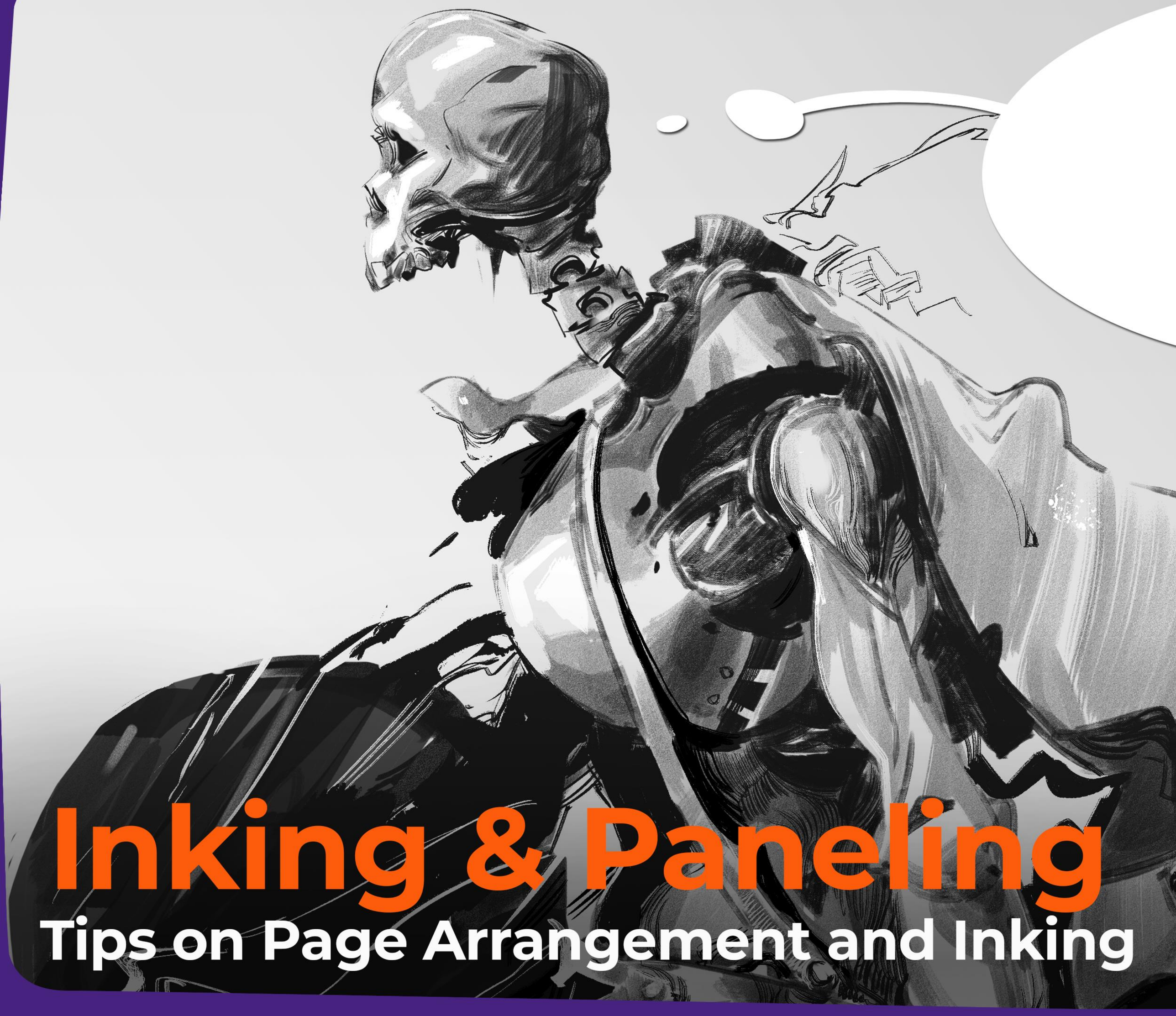
If the main light source (in this case a flashlight) is shining from the direction of the viewer, cast shadows appear as a dark border around the subject.

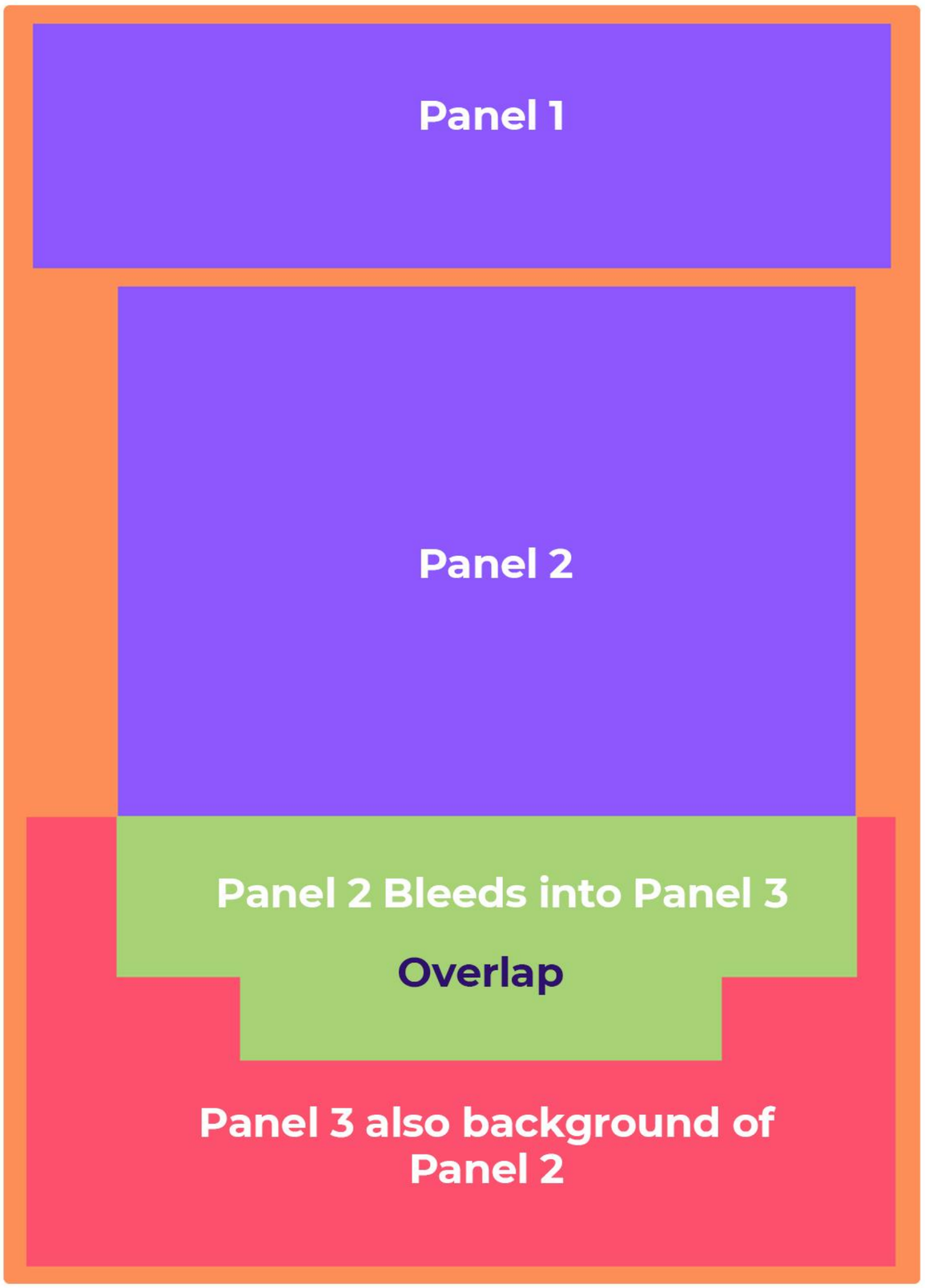
Learn more about spooky lighting in this video



Inking & Paneling

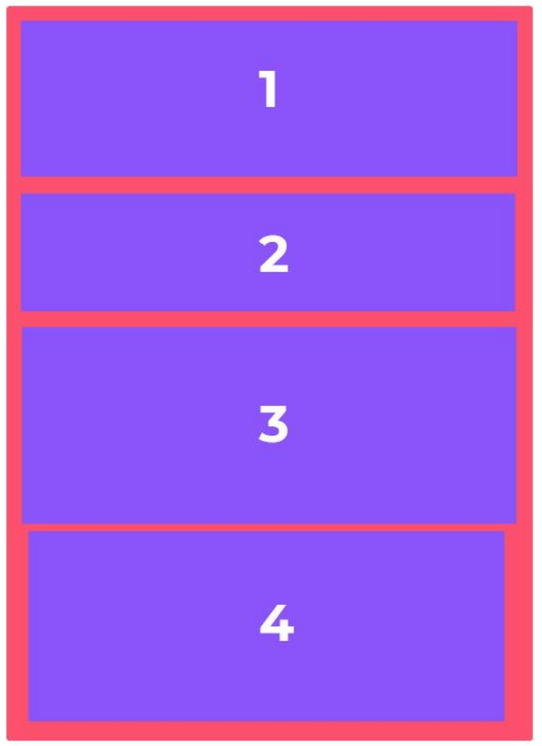
Tips on Page Arrangement and Inking

Panels

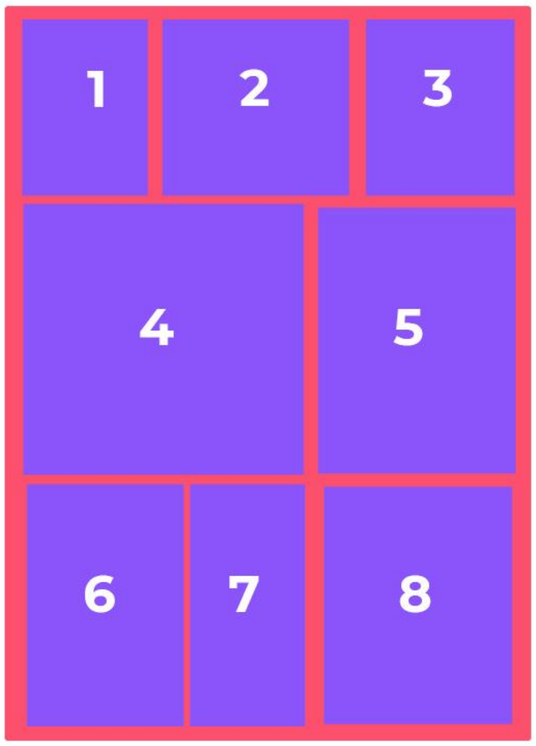


This is our example with the artwork on the main page.

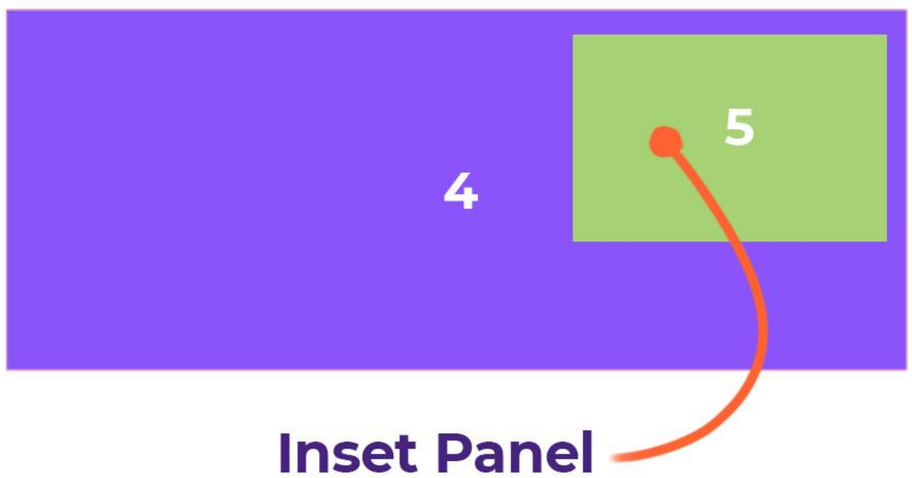
Other Panel Examples



Horizontal is great for depicting landscapes or showcasing a continous action



Z paneling is great to show and tell various actions, character reactions or conversations



**Depending on your story -
you might want to use different panels**

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Inking & Paneling (3/4)

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Composition

For each panel, you have to establish at least a preliminary composition that has to relate to your story.

A1. Has an introductory purpose - the first encounter.

A2. Has a focus on our main character - who looks determined and moving.

A3. Creates tension and has an emphasis on what is yet to come - somewhat unpredictable.

It is also important to relate things through dialogue or even between pages as you will see in the last slide.

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Inking & Paneling (4/4)

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Page 1

Page 2

See essential inking tips in [this video]

The rest of the work is just inking - and in this case here, a bit of painting as well. We use overlap of scenes - inset - and a simple arrangement to enhance readability. This has to work well without text, but sometimes the text really makes a big difference, depending on the story.

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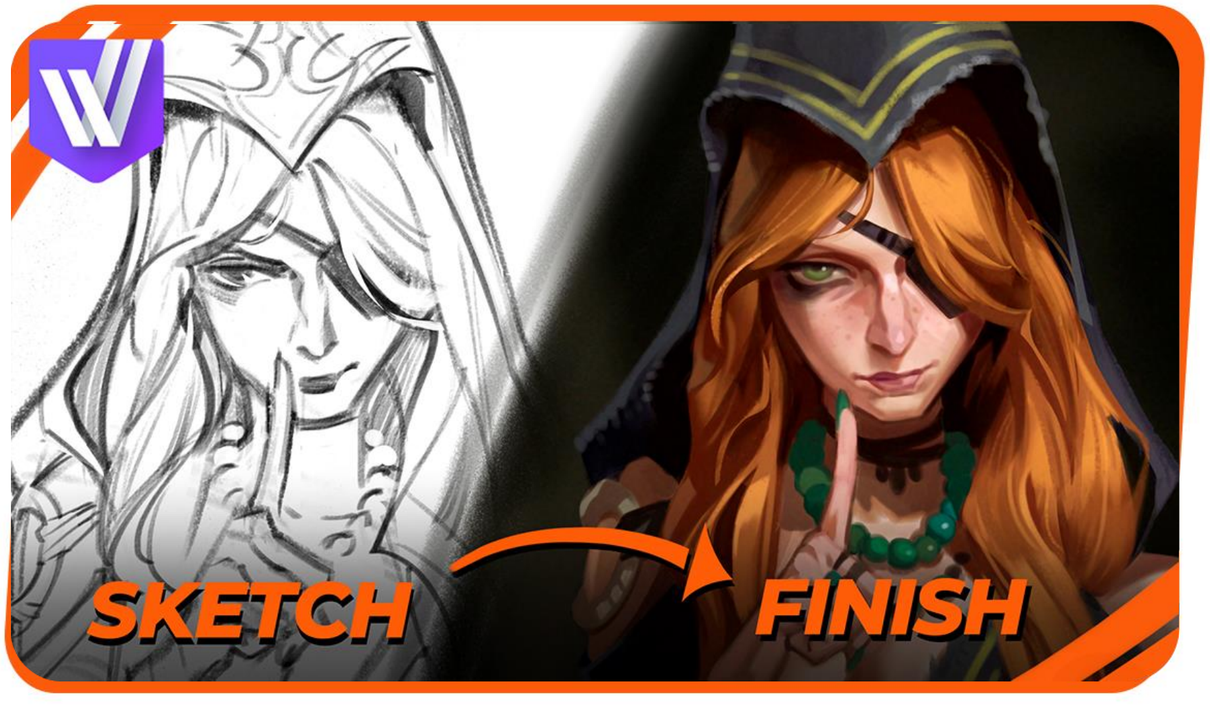

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